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Submitted to the Program of Organizational Dynamics, College of Liberal and Professional Studies In the School of Arts and Sciences In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Science in Organizational Dynamics at the University of Pennsylvania

Advisor: Erek Ostrowski, PhD

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The Role Of Growth Mindset In The Evolution Of Self

Abstract

This capstone details my experience in the Organizational Dynamics (OD) program over a 2-year period, documenting the potential of embracing a growth mindset. Leading up to my time in the program, I felt aimless in my professional life, trying to “climb the ladder” but facing seemingly insurmountable, limiting beliefs about myself and the world around me. I lacked self-confidence and vision, but more paralyzing than that, I was stuck within a fixed mindset. My experience is one of transformation, where equal emphasis was placed on learning and unlearning. Learning was focused on theory, evidence-based practices, and the sharing of ideas. Unlearning was focused on reflection and the breakdown of formerly accepted norms and unquestioned beliefs. The focal point in my own story has been the shift from a fixed to a growth mindset; that is, the belief that one has the capacity to evolve, improve, grow. This is an account of what can happen when replacing the pursuit of status and achievement with the pursuit of personal growth. My experience shows the potential for growth that comes from embracing uncertainty, ambiguity, and vulnerability. Although the courses in the OD program do encourage growth, the goal of this capstone is not to assert the necessity of enrolling in a master’s program. The goal is to demonstrate the value and power any individual can access to overcome life’s obstacles by embracing a growth mindset.

Keywords

Personal growth, growth, growth mindset, learning, unlearning

Comments

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Advisor: Erek Ostrowski, PhD

THE ROLE OF GROWTH MINDSET IN THE EVOLUTION OF SELF

by

Ian S. Wheeler

Submitted to the Program of Organizational Dynamics,
College of Liberal and Professional Studies
In the School of Arts and Sciences
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Science in Organizational Dynamics at the
University of Pennsylvania

Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

2021

THE ROLE OF GROWTH MINDSET IN THE EVOLUTION OF SELF

Approved by:

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ABSTRACT

This capstone details my experience in the Organizational Dynamics (OD) program over a 2-year period, documenting the potential of embracing a growth mindset. Leading up to my time in the program, I felt aimless in my professional life, trying to “climb the ladder” but facing seemingly insurmountable, limiting beliefs about myself and the world around me. I lacked self-confidence and vision, but more paralyzing than that, I was stuck within a fixed mindset. My experience is one of transformation, where equal emphasis was placed on learning and unlearning. Learning was focused on theory, evidence-based practices, and the sharing of ideas. Unlearning was focused on reflection and the breakdown of formerly accepted norms and unquestioned beliefs. The focal point in my own story has been the shift from a fixed to a growth mindset; that is, the belief that one has the capacity to evolve, improve, grow. This is an account of what can happen when replacing the pursuit of status and achievement with the pursuit of personal growth. My experience shows the potential for growth that comes from embracing uncertainty, ambiguity, and vulnerability. Although the courses in the OD program do encourage growth, the goal of this capstone is not to assert the necessity of enrolling in a master’s program. The goal is to demonstrate the value and power any individual can access to overcome life’s obstacles by embracing a growth mindset.

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Because this process has been deeply personal—as one would expect from a personal journey portfolio—it might seem like I live in a self-concealed vacuum where I believe I accomplish all things alone. This could not be further from the truth. While I do acknowledge my own efforts, I did not make this journey alone. To my capstone advisor, Erek, I cannot thank you enough for investing in me as a human, as well as your support and patience with me through this writing process. You have been teacher, advisor, coach, mentor, and friend at all the right times. To my reader, Sharon, thank you for your invitation to be brave, your timely push to “just finish the damn thing,” and your incredibly valuable perspective and feedback. To my coaching advisor, Linda Pennington, for your encouragement to trust myself and have confidence in the coaching process. To my faculty “guru” and mentor/friend, Amrita Subramanian, for your reassurance to trust my body’s response to each moment, remaining suspicious of the familiar and open to the unfamiliar. To my editor, Vivian Fransen, for making this project look nice and offering relevant modifications. To all my classmates and faculty who shared their ideas, knowledge, and experiences, eased my imposter syndrome, and provided an adaptive space for me to grow, reflect, and be challenged. To the members of OCEC Cohort 9 who provided a safe place to be vulnerable, validated my experience, and trusted me with their stories. To my first client, Ashley Simmons, for trusting me as a coach. And to my friends and family who believe in me when I struggle to believe in myself.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION TO MY JOURNEY

“When people have lived with assumptions long enough, passed down through the generations as incontrovertible fact, they are accepted as the truths of physics, no longer needing even to be spoken. They are as true and as unremarkable as water flowing through rivers or the air that we breathe.”
—Wilkerson (2021, p184)

This capstone chronicles my journey through the Organizational Dynamics (OD) program at the University of Pennsylvania. Because this is my own experience, the concept of identity appears throughout, constantly shifting as needed—as I needed it to—so I could make sense of myself, realities, myths, and my space and role in ever-changing contexts. Each chapter observes this journey from different angles, navigating the contours of my experience and creating what has been and will continue to be an evolving image. There is no finished product in this story—the only constant is change—and that is equally overwhelming and relieving. This realization is overwhelming because the very intentional work that goes into an evolution of mind and spirit is not easy work. It is also relieving because it removes monotony from the equation and means that I will continue learning for as long as I have breath.

This first chapter introduces my movement before and through the OD program, movement driven by the lens of growth mindset, which has produced subsequent lenses such as a positive outlook, open-mindedness, and unconditional positive regard. *Movement* refers to the change in my frameworks and sense of self identity as I have moved through the program. I also share

what my aha moments have been and how certain experiences in my life helped to produce these moments of intense clarity. These moments for me, in reality not always momentary, often come about over time, slowly filtering through the unconscious into the conscious mind.

The second chapter explores the literature surrounding the primary theoretical lenses that helped to produce this work. I introduce literature on growth mindset, adult learning theories, and identity theories and concepts. Each lens has given me language that helps to contextualize the transformational change I experienced through the OD program. The third chapter delves into the details of my aha moments throughout the program. I wonder about and explore the role of growth mindset in producing these aha moments and shaping my experience and insights.

The fourth chapter attempts to connect what all of these details mean in the context of my life, personally and professionally. The OD program has changed how I view myself, and how I speak to and about myself. It has led to changing how I approach others in conversation, which has significantly impacted my encounters with family, friends, colleagues, new acquaintances, and strangers. It has significantly educated my understanding of organizations, which has aided my professional growth. I also explore in this chapter how my perspective has changed over time, specifically focusing on my time in the OD program.

The last chapter appeals to my innermost unconscious to explore what questions I still have, what is so far not understood, and what has yet to be

learned. I conclude the capstone by sharing how I plan to extend and further develop my learning from the OD program over time.

Doing It for Me

Pursuing this master's degree is the first major thing I have done for myself. Even my choice of undergraduate institution was not truly a choice as I was compelled to attend a certain type of undergraduate university—Christian; the alternative would have resulted in the loss of support, (limited) financial and otherwise, from my family.

I moved to Philadelphia for my partner. I went into financial debt and stayed in debt for years so that I could partake in friends' weddings across the United States. I went into deeper financial debt by giving money to friends who I knew had no intention of paying me back, and I did not ask or expect them to. I cannot explain these occurrences as pure selflessness. In large part these choices—or perceived choices—come from the instilled doctrine of “deny thyself,” which was engrained in me from before I could understand the words, much less the concept.

This deeply rooted idea taken to the extreme made me feel that anything I did for myself was reprehensible, which resulted in a constant state of self-shame. Though I rebelled internally against this dogma for years, it was an aimless rebellion, coated in self-deprecating humor, fear, hurt, disgust, anger, sadness, and shame. These emotions made it difficult to see clearly, to sift through my reality and determine what I desired for myself. I knew I wanted something more, and I knew I wanted something different, but I did not know how

to get there. The something more was not to increase my professional prospects, though that is a convenient side effect of furthering one's studies. I wanted more for myself personally. I wanted to prove to my inner voice that I was capable. I wanted to prove to that voice, the voice that I had let break me down for as long as I could remember, that it was wrong. I wanted to grow out of old things and grow into new things. My desired outcome for this pursuit of personal growth was to grow into someone I knew I could be. Little did I know how difficult it would be and how much self-reflection would be involved in this journey. I am glad I did not know as that might have dissuaded me.

I thought back to my undergraduate experience, thinking about what course of study I could pursue in furthering my learning. The most obvious answer was to stay within the vicinity of my undergraduate studies—exercise physiology—considering I had a head start in that area. The problem was the idea was revolting to me. Since I did not enjoy this area of study as an undergraduate, how would I get through the next level of content as a graduate student? I had waded through my undergraduate experience, not expecting much from myself and not truly challenging myself.

Enter Growth Mindset

The fixed idea of who I was and who I could and could not be had always been a seemingly impenetrable barrier. So, instead of trying to get past this barrier as I had in the past, I approached it from a different angle by utterly demolishing the barrier's foundation. I did this by questioning preconceived ideas

about myself and my reality, breaking out of a confined mental structure, namely, a fixed mindset with fixed concepts such as a fixed identity.

I began addressing the concept of identity work, which describes the process by which we construct a “coherent, distinct and positively valued” understanding of self (Alvesson et al., 2008, p. 15). In this work of constructing identity, we constantly address the question of *who am I?* In doing so we create a self-narrative by drawing on our memories (past) and desires (future) filtered through cultural resources available to us to either imitate or completely transform our sense of self (Alvesson et al., 2008).

I began doing the hard work that Wilkerson (2021) refers to in the opening quote of this chapter: questioning assumptions, those that I had made on my own as well as the ones that had been passed down to me as indisputable truths. This level of self-reflection is an essential part of the transformative learning process. Critically reflecting on assumptions through self-reflection, reading, or hearing another point of view is ultimately how we transform our views, even our framework (Mezirow, 1997).

Our beliefs, points of view, and interpretations of reality and the world around us are based on assumptions that we can either choose to address or leave unspoken, unthought, and unbothered. Mezirow (2018) expands on this theory by saying that critical reflection or self-reflection is only one element of the transformative learning process. The second element is participating in dialectical discourse.

Everything was on the table, and I came to realize it always would be on the table. The loss of certainty is simultaneously terrifying and freeing. I refer to this form of questioning as *deconstructing*, a term most associated with French philosopher Jacques Derrida. In short, it can be thought of as unlearning: dissolving the most base-level molecules that form the pillars that construct the house that can be thought of as my framework, the cumulative lens through which to see the world. Unlearning is a vital part of growth, whether we are referring to individuals or larger sets, organizations, and societies (Matsuo, 2019). Unlearning—“or abandoning obsolete beliefs, values, knowledge, and routines”—is important because existing knowledge, habits, and frameworks can bar us from learning or being open to learn new things (Matsuo, 2019, p. 465).

Through this initial breakthrough, I questioned myself: *Is there any part of my undergraduate experience that can be salvaged and propel me into my next area of growth?* This might sound like a dramatic question to ask because, of course, there are salvageable experiences from my undergraduate experience, but it did not feel like it at the time. At that point, it felt more negative than positive because I accrued quite a bit of financial debt for a degree that I had not used since graduating over 4 years prior and had no desire to build on. What eventually came to mind after repeatedly asking the question was a leadership elective course that happened to fit perfectly into my senior spring semester schedule.

The professor began the class by stating, “This class will be as challenging as you choose. You will only get out of it what you put in. This is true

for class, and this is true in life.” That was a pivotal moment for me. I am sure it was not the first time I heard this ostensibly obvious truth in identical or similar conveyance, but it was my first time internalizing it. The class focused on possible characteristics of leadership, which are historically thought of in masculine terms (Zigarelli, 2015). However, it did open the door to leadership characteristics outside of the norm, characteristics that I saw in myself—qualities that are considered more feminine in nature—such as patience, compassion, empathy, vulnerability, and inclusion. That class awakened a quiet passion for understanding leadership and group dynamics that lay mostly dormant for the next few years—that is, until I questioned what I am passionate about. My answers were as follows:

- People
- Networks
- Group dynamics
- How we communicate and fail to communicate
- How we encourage and build each other up
- How we discourage and tear each other down
- How we move forward, regardless of the endless combination of factors that inevitably and constantly stand in the way

The welcomed awakening from dormancy eventually led me to the OD program, which was after years of good and bad real-life experiences with leadership that formed my initial concept of what makes a good leader. Regardless of good or bad leadership, I learned just as much, if not more, from

bad leadership, or negative experiences and failures in general. Even in this, my perspective began changing. I began shifting into a mindset that says my perception determines my failure or success. I cannot control the variables outside myself, but what I can control is how I react. If I can learn and grow in some capacity from what some would deem a failure, is it really failure?

Framework Matters

Aren't there cheaper ways to pursue personal growth? Why enroll in a master's program? The truth is there are innumerable options to pursue one's personal growth. We create endless possibilities by simply entertaining the idea that it is less about the path than it is about the mindset that we carry into and through the journey. As my professor stated, "You will only get out of it what you put in." I would add, "You will only put in what you believe you can put in."

Our mindsets might be more influential in determining outcomes than we think. Having a fixed mindset means we believe things are essentially set in stone; there is little control we have on our circumstances. Having a growth mindset means the opposite. According to Dweck (2016):

Growth mindset is based on the belief that your basic qualities are things you can cultivate through your efforts, your strategies, and help from others. Although people may differ in every which way—in their initial talents and aptitudes, interests, or temperaments—everyone can change and grow through application and experience. (p. 7)

It matters how we perceive ourselves and what we believe about ourselves, our capabilities, our strengths, our deficiencies. Deconstructing the most basic ideas about myself tilted my self-concept on the mindset spectrum, causing the gravitational pull to sway me slowly but naturally toward a growth

mindset. I mention this concept as a spectrum because the growth mindset framework has led me to see most of reality outside of dualistic thinking patterns.

Whether through coursework, interactions with classmates and professors, class readings and the ensuing conversations these readings sparked, or self-reflection, I drew closer and closer to more fully incorporating a growth mindset. This growth paved the way to related theoretical lenses through which to view the world, many of which link directly to my OD courses. It led to a more positive outlook as I developed the skills and desire to make the most out of every opportunity and situation. It led to open-mindedness, the constant expansion of one's horizons, thereby holding absolute truths and certainties very loosely. It led to practicing unconditional positive regard, the goal of this being to consciously engage in the practice of suspending judgment.

The process of implementing a growth mindset along with these other frameworks is not instantaneous and not always applied in every aspect of life. As I become aware of fixed ideas in one area, I divert my attention to begin adopting a growth mindset in that area. By these means, a growth mindset spreads through my conscious mind, thus moving the unconscious into the realm of consciousness. Or at least that is the goal.

“Aha!” Moments

The contours of life tend to bring about aha moments—epiphanies, breakthroughs, realizations, key insights—at unexpected times. The unexpected nature of these breakthroughs is why they have been so significant, even life-altering, for me. In order to understand and make meaning of these moments, I

have found it helpful to think of aha moments as a culmination of *what*, *how*, and *when*. The *what* pertains to the content of the aha moment, including the lenses through which I see the particular breakthrough. The *how* relates to the circumstances under which I came to the realization. The *when* takes into account my movement, when or where I am in life and the many factors leading to this being the exact moment in time when I am ready to experience a particular aha moment.

The “What”

As for the breakthroughs, I can identify four significant aha moments that most clearly define my time in the OD program. Each one has had a profound impact on me, influencing how I view the world and how I approach myself and others. They are organized chronologically based on discovery.

First, the realization that perspective is everything led to the adjustments I made in positive self-talk, moving away from absolutes and moving toward discomfort. Second, by having the courage to face discomforts and fears, I came to realize I needed to confront myself more often and more honestly. Third, the OD program brought about a different understanding of organizations, which was significantly aided by the use of metaphors. This understanding also shed light on the value and need for me to create space for myself and others. Fourth, I found my passion in coaching, experiencing for the first time that I could truly love and be passionate about my *work*. The insight resulting from this series of moments has simultaneously aided my learning and my unlearning, and propelled a growth mindset, among other lenses into my conscious mind.

The overarching lens of growth mindset weaves in and out of every aha moment. Growth mindset is intertwined with each moment. By entering the program with the intention and motivation of pursuing personal growth, I predisposed myself to a growth mindset. This growth mindset created the possibilities for seeing the world anew, experiencing life through unfamiliar eyes. This insight naturally led to having a more positive outlook, being more open-minded, and affording others the benefit of the doubt through unconditional positive regard. This new framework through which to experience life uncovered things I had failed to see before. It removed a veil; but, more importantly, my new framework gave me permission to remove that veil and cross the membrane into unfamiliarity and wonder. In this unfamiliar territory is where I encountered a breakthrough—and will continue to experience many more aha moments.

These breakthroughs, in turn, feed into my overall lens through which I see and experience the world, that which I experience with everyone else—the world created by social constructs, contracts, myths, traditions, unquestioned norms, and accepted realities—and that which I create for myself as I observe and decipher this shared reality. It is an ever-evolving framework that protracts and retracts as needed.

It should be noted that not all frameworks can protract and retract. Some frameworks, such as my former framework, are grounded in fixed ideas, which naturally require fixed stability and absolute certainty. This framework, centered around evangelical Christianity, ascribed absolute theologies and doctrines, ideas, characteristics, values, and truths to unseen concepts. People with a fixed

framework might be more inclined to adjust the world around them to their framework.

Other frameworks are inherently and purposefully un-fixed, meaning they are constantly changing, remolding, and adapting to new discoveries. People with an un-fixed framework might be more inclined to readjust their framework to make sense of life and the world around them. Here again, we see the influence of transformative learning, encouraging—even requiring—us to push back on and test existing and forming sociocultural constructs. Mezirow (2018) noted that the process of transformative learning involves “reassessing reasons that support problematic meaning perspectives or frames of reference” (p. 127). These reasons are features of a cultural context, such as ideology, religion, politics, class, race, and gender.

The “How”

My *how*, as related to my circumstances, was quite simple: I was ready for it. I was ready for change, ready to push limits, ready to test preconceived ideas. My entire framework leading up to the OD program was centered around very strict, traditional, conservative, religious ideas that ruled how I viewed myself and others. Before entering the program, I had poked holes into this framework but never large enough to not be able to patch the holes up haphazardly afterward. This process opened the door for the *how*, most likely intensifying the results achieved through the program. Once I truly tested the framework, it crumbled, and with it my compulsory need to have a fixed framework.

As I alluded to earlier, it is a terrifying endeavor even testing one's framework, let alone finding it unsuitable to continue using. It is terrifying because simply testing it could lead to finding it unsuitable; finding it unsuitable could lead to several outcomes, all of which are complicated. The most probable outcomes for me would be either: (1) acknowledging my former framework as unsuitable but, because it made up the entirety of my lens through which to view reality up to that point, I would ignore discrepancies and retain this framework, or (2) acknowledging my former framework as unsuitable and accepting a new, more flexible, unfixed framework. Both outcomes were terrifying to me because either I would feign acceptance of something I could not fully return to, or I would venture to transform the framework through which I understand the world around me.

The "When"

The importance of the *when* cannot be understated; timing is everything. For example, I have most definitely heard at least a variation of my undergraduate professor's words, "you will only get out of it what you put in," but it was not until that moment, at age 22 years, when I was ready to internalize the meaning. The combination of the following factors made it precisely the right time for me to actually hear those words: (1) I was starting my last semester of undergraduate studies; (2) I was quickly realizing I did not want to pursue a career in exercise physiology; (3) I took time to reflect on what I cared about; (4) I knew the professor was popular and did not want to miss the opportunity to learn something; and (5) I was searching for meaning in my life. Surely, other factors were at play; these are the ones that came to my awareness.

The Question of Identity. In recognizing the *when*, certainly identity plays an important role—who I am *when* a breakthrough strikes. The question of identity requires a multilayered response, more than could ever be given in the format we are trained to provide answers when asked the question. We all have multiple identities, with some identities being more salient than others. This concept is known as role identity salience, which assumes “some role-identities are more a part of the self than others and consequently have a variable effect on self-concept” (Callero, 1985, p. 203). This concept means that someone who is a daughter, sister, mother, Buddhist, female, professional, crochet fanatic, soccer player, and yoga enthusiast is not only one of these things, but all at once, and at the same time more one thing over another—maybe more mother than yoga enthusiast.

These different roles or aspects of identity are not mutually exclusive so one’s identity as a professional does not remove their identity as a parent, but the salience of one supersedes the other. Three factors are thought to contribute to our emphasis of identity salience: self-definition, social relationships, and role-specific actions and behaviors (Callero, 1985). Our multiple identities live in tension with each other; they are “inherently intertwined” (Yakushko et al., 2009, p. 180) and make up our self-concept.

Asking myself who I am or who I think I am elicits an answer beyond the knee-jerk categorizations we assign to ourselves and others. Answering this question with any semblance of honesty requires deep self-reflection to determine the parts of my identity I was given and the parts I actively choose.

How might someone categorize me at first sight? Unquestionably, by my physical, skin-deep appearance, which is how we are conditioned to think, placing each other into boxes of who someone is supposed to be based on what they look like. Each categorization, each descriptor, and each label carries baggage: “labeling someone as white, homosexual, rich, or Hindu are ways of saying other things about these people” (Nkomo, 2010, p. 73). Categorizing poses a risk of depersonalizing the individual. Hogg and Reid (2006) noted that by placing someone in a group, we view them not as a unique individual, “but as embodiments of the attributes of their group” (p. 10) or, as Nkomo (2010) puts it, “one of them” (p. 77).

There is an obvious danger in formulating an “us versus them” concept. In historical context we need not look further than events such as the Holocaust to recognize the danger. Wilkerson (2021) has observed:

We are told over and over again in our society not to judge a book by its cover, not to assume what is inside before we have had a chance to read it. Yet humans size up and make assumptions about other humans based upon what they look like many times a day. We prejudice complicated breathing beings in ways we are told never to judge inanimate objects. (p. 223)

We do this so naturally to each other that we often categorize and judge ourselves under the same premise. Research from Banaji and Greenwald (2016) yielded findings that stereotypes are harmful not only for how we view others, but also how we view ourselves (p. 18). We place ourselves into the boxes we are told we belong in. And how could we not? If society, culture, ads, music, movies, history books, institutions, and even friends and family tell us who we are, it takes a concerted effort to climb past the seemingly unassailable narrative of who we

are told we are to actually find who we are. Maybe we find that everything we hear about us is true, but it is important to at least sift through the data. Maybe we can even dare to determine who we want to be when that does not fall within the allotted assumptions.

My Given Identity. Past the physical characteristics that I inherited, there are other parts of my identity that I was given. I have long wrestled with the cultural aspect of my identity due to being born and raised in Guatemala to very Texan parents, and now having spent the last 10 years of my life in the northeastern United States. Hispanic culture, cowboy-church-wild-west-farming-country culture, and northeast city life are not exactly compatible. This variety of backgrounds and experiences formulate much of how I view the world and myself.

I was raised in a conservative household on an orphanage compound, along with three older biological brothers and 50+ other brothers and sisters at any given time. Because of who my parents are—evangelical Christian missionaries—I was a token child, held to impossible standards of perfection. Because of my parents' profession, our family routinely toured and spoke at churches to raise money and support for their ministry, which often resulted in uncomfortable attention directed at me, a “product” of their ministry.

For this reason, I do not like being in front of people or at the center of attention, no matter how small the group. I think in many ways group settings today take me back to the unattainable expectations I felt compelled to live up to

then, but seldom did. This fully internalized expectation is one of the aspects of my identity that I am unlearning.

I am a sensitive person, which I attribute to my desire to please others. Through the OD program, I have learned to be more sensitive to my own needs, something that I have always struggled with. My sensitivity results in a heightened awareness and the ability to empathize well.

I was raised in the midst of extreme poverty, within a mile of the largest squatter's village in Central America. In my fortunate case, the lower rungs of Maslow's hierarchy of needs (Maslow, 1942) have always been present, but throughout my most impressionable years I was close enough to observe the absence of physiological and safety needs for others. Because of this, I tend to have a profound appreciation for everything in my life, especially the basic necessities. It is not uncommon for me to experience a deep sense of gratitude in simply lying down in bed, feeling the warmth of my blanket and the memory foam of my pillow, knowing that I can close my eyes with complete confidence in personal safety.

My Chosen Identity. As for the chosen portions of my identity, this concept ties back to my framework and the lenses through which I choose to see—growth mindset, positive outlook, open-mindedness, and unconditional positive regard. One of the most salient parts of my chosen identity is what can be characterized as a rebellious or suspicious outlook on popular trends, traditions, beliefs, and practices. It makes me question social constructs that I

become aware of, out of genuine curiosity to understand their purpose, benefit, and harm.

Another aspect of my chosen identity is that I love my given identity of background. That is, I have come to terms with not appearing to be Guatemalan, with passing the appearance test to fit in with American culture. This part of my identity has its upside, given the privilege of picking and choosing the aspects of each culture that will determine who I think I am in relation to each. If anything, it pushes me toward a sentiment of global citizenship. Here is an example of this privilege of benefiting from my whiteness as well as my multicultural background. White people are comfortable around me because they see me as “one of us”—yes, I have heard this word for word. Initial rigidity and discomfort I sense from minorities almost immediately dissipates when they find out where I come from.

Further Understanding Identity. Earlier I mentioned the dangers of labeling each other, but the other side of this coin reveals our need to form and be a part of groups. It is natural for us to create in-group/out-group behaviors as this can promote “bonding within a group and enhanced self-esteem” (Nkomo, 2010, p. 77). Nkomo (2010) also shares that self-concept is based on multiple group memberships, so it is necessary for us to explore identity to determine if we are maximizing our group memberships and expanding the borders of our inclusivity.

Social identity theory and identity theory help to expand the understanding and formulation of self, especially in relation to groups. Stets and Burke (2000) noted that both theories explain our process of self-categorization or identification

in that “the self is reflexive in that it can take itself as an object and can categorize, classify, or name itself in particular ways in relation to other social categories or classifications” (p. 224).

Furthermore, self-categorizing ourselves results in “an accentuation of the perceived similarities between the self and other in-group members, and an accentuation of the perceived differences between the self and out-group members” (Stets & Burke, 2000, p. 225). Another consequence of self-categorization and identification is the inevitable knee-jerk social comparison in which we selectively exaggerate and assign what we deem as positive characteristics to the in-group and do the same for what we deem as negative characteristics to the out-group (Stets & Burke, 2000, p. 225), thereby widening the gap, which, in turn, polarizes our views of each other.

Aha!

My hope is that in seeing the *what*, the *how*, and the *when*, one can begin to understand their significance in how I arrive at my aha moments. They are all important factors—and shed light on subfactors—in producing the aha moment itself. Additionally, these factors and subfactors determine the meaning and the longevity of the aha moment.

This chapter introduced some of the literature, especially within the concept of identity. The next chapter expands on identity literature, as well as literature on growth mindset and adult learning theories.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

“The spirit is never at rest but always engaged in ever progressive motion, in giving itself a new form.”—Hegel (1807 as cited in Illeris, 2018, p. 45)

The Lenses Used to Unpack My Experiences

I use three primary lenses to unpack and make sense of my experiences in the OD program. The lenses are interwoven throughout the capstone, but this chapter focuses more closely on the related literature for each lens. First, I review the literature on growth mindset, in particular the mindset research of Dweck (2016) as outlined in her book *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success*. Second, I review relevant adult learning theories, mainly—though not exclusively—as compiled by Illeris (2018) in his book *Contemporary Theories of Learning: Learning Theorists... In Their Own Words*. Third, I cover the literature relevant to identity theories such as social identity theory and identity theory. Each section below opens with a quote that is meant to connect the scholarly literature to my own experience with these lenses.

Growth Mindset

“‘Becoming is better than being.’ The fixed mindset does not allow people the luxury of becoming. They have to already be.”—Dweck (2016, p. 25)

Dweck’s (2016) research shows that the mindset that we hold and how we think of ourselves have serious implications for how we live. In her view, either we can have a fixed mindset—in which we view our intelligence and qualities as static, seemingly “carved in stone” (p. 6)—or we can have a growth mindset—in which we view our qualities as malleable and our intelligence as capable of

growth. People with a fixed mindset tend to worry about how inherently smart they are, think they're dumb when they fail, sometimes dislike or avoid giving effort, and show impaired performance when facing adversity (Dweck, 2012). People with a growth mindset, on the other hand, tend to value learning instead of trying to look smart, seek out challenges, enjoy making an effort, and “thrive in the face of difficulty” (Dweck, 2012, p. 201).

Whether it is ultimately true or untrue that our intelligence quotients (IQs) and qualities are carved in stone seems to matter very little. What matters is how we think of ourselves and our beliefs about our capabilities and limitations. Research on adolescent students shows that even if two students have equal intellectual ability, the students' mindsets determine how they respond to challenges (Blackwell et al., 2007). Their beliefs about their own intellectual abilities or limitations leads to students measuring their own ability, or lack of ability, which results in the student either giving up (fixed) or pushing through (growth). The reality is that “mindsets are just beliefs” (Dweck, 2016, p. 16)—beliefs that lead us more toward a fixed mindset or more toward a growth mindset.

We all hold a combination of fixed and growth mindsets; we tend to have different mindsets in different areas (Dweck, 2016). It is simpler to think of ourselves as only having one or the other. However, having a purely growth mindset—or a strictly fixed mindset in every facet—is altogether unlikely. Holding to the idea that mindsets are beliefs, mindsets in different areas can change, but that change is not simply switching out a fixed mindset with a growth

mindset or vice versa. Dweck (2016) describes the change as new beliefs being held side by side with old beliefs, “and as [the new beliefs] become stronger, they give you a different way to think, feel, and act” (p. 224). So at least for a period of time it seems possible to hold both mindsets at once even within the same area, but one of the mindsets will eventually take over, determining how we view ourselves and respond to adversity.

Dweck (2016) describes research conducted with children in which praise was offered in very different ways. With one group of children, praise was offered on ability (fixed); for the other group, praise was offered based on effort (growth). Ability praise included statements such as “that’s a really good score. You must be smart at this” (p. 71), whereas effort praise included statements such as “that’s a really good score. You must have worked really hard” (p. 72). These groups, equal at the beginning of the study, began to differ post-praise. After experiencing more difficult problems that both groups struggled with, the effort-praised students excelled because they seemed to enjoy the learning experience, whereas the ability-praised students’ performance plummeted. Presumably, the method of praise can impact IQ in a measurable way.

Blackwell et al. (2007) conducted research on changing mindsets via a 2-year study with 373 middle schoolers to test the impact that implicit theories of intelligence have on mathematics achievement. These researchers found that having a growth mindset is positively associated with stronger learning goals, positive beliefs about effort, and a constructive learning response to failure (that is, “fewer ability-based, ‘helpless’ attributions” [p. 258]). These results are

consistent with Dweck's (2016) assertion that growth mindset-minded people see failure as "a problem to be faced, dealt with, and learned from" (p. 33). Blackwell et al. (2007) also found quantitative evidence for the value of growth mindset. Over the two-year study, the students with an initial framework of growth mindset increased their mathematics grades relative to the students with a fixed mindset.

It is difficult to measure a growth mindset and factors such as effort and motivation. It is also challenging to account for extenuating circumstances and uncontrollable factors. Thus, research on growth mindset and its real-life impact is inconsistent. Some research shows no positive correlation between growth mindset and better academic achievement (Bahník & Vranka, 2016). In fact, Bahník and Vranka's study looked at 5653 university applicants and found a negative correlation between growth mindset and scholastic aptitude. McCabe et al. (2020) found similar discouraging results in a self-reported assessment from undergraduate-age students. Other research shows growth mindset has a positive correlation with learning outcomes, student achievement, facing failure and learning from it, giving maximum effort, and sustaining motivation (Dweck, 2016; Blackwell et al., 2007; Dweck, 2012).

Perhaps, to the detriment of research and substantive evidence, growth mindset's benefits cannot be fully measured. Because mindset—a mental construct—is self-determined by each individual, it is qualitative rather than quantitative. Does that make it irrelevant or unimportant? Maybe to some people. Does having a growth mindset solve all of our problems? That would seem a stretch, even from the most optimistic among us. As Dweck (2016) states, it does

not solve all of our problems, but it has the potential to enrich life; because of growth mindset, she is a “more alive, courageous, and open person” (p. 264).

Adult Learning Theories

“The curious paradox is that when I accept myself just as I am, then I can change.”—Rogers and Kramer (1995, p. 17)

The main adult learning theories that have impacted my experience are andragogy, transformative learning theory, experiential learning, and self-efficacy. Differentiating itself from childhood education, andragogy is student/adult-directed learning. It posits that since adults are able to self-direct their lives in most arenas, they should also be in charge of their own learning (Merriam, 2018). Andragogy assumes that adults’ experiences are a valuable resource to draw on in their learning experience (Cox, 2006). It also assumes adults are goal-oriented, so they need to know why they are learning something; adult learning needs to be relevant, solving real dilemmas; adult learning needs to be practical; and, adults are more intrinsically motivated (Cox, 2006, p. 196).

Transformative learning is learning that encompasses a life-altering shift in our understanding of ourselves and the world around us (Cox, 2006). This type of learning usually involves a dramatic experience or aha moment—what Mezirow terms a disorienting dilemma. Disorienting dilemmas challenge adults “to examine their assumptions and beliefs that have guided meaning making in the past” but now seem inadequate or insufficient (Merriam, 2018, p. 86). Mezirow (2018) stresses that transformation can be “*epochal*—sudden major orientations” or “*cumulative*” (p. 118). Kegan (2018) describes this dramatic change, whether epochal or cumulative, as epistemological in nature. What

typically arises from this experience is a more open-minded and inclusive perspective (Merriam, 2018). According to Mezirow (2018), transformation leads to us becoming more ourselves, leading to the “emergence of the self” (p. 125).

This emergence of the self, this growth, can only take place through questioning assumptions (Cox, 2006). Transformative learning, a growth experience, calls everything into question, including one’s assumptions, beliefs, and values. In referring to post-traumatic growth, May et al. (2012) imply that if we do not allow for transformation to run its course, we risk missing an opportunity or missing the point entirely: “If we do not allow the situation to shatter our former worldview, we strive to fit the current reality into the former schema, like putting a square peg into a round hole” (p. 33).

Experiential learning and Kolb’s experiential learning cycle give meaning to the process of learning as an adult. The premise here is that we learn best by doing, through experience; specifically, “knowledge is created through the transformation of experience” (Kolb, 1984 as cited in Kolb & Kolb, 2005, p. 194).

Kolb and Kolb (2005) expanded on previous experiential learning work by creating his cyclical representation for how people learn from experience. This four-part cycle goes from concrete experience to reflective observation to abstract conceptualization to active experimentation, and back to concrete experience. This cycle can be thought of as “experiencing, reflecting, thinking, and acting” (p. 194). Kolb and Kolb are quite humanistic in their approach, emphasizing the individual and expressing the importance “to base teaching on learners’ own ‘subjective’ experiences” (Elkjaer, 2018, p. 71).

Bandura (1993) defines self-efficacy as “people’s beliefs about their capabilities to exercise control over their own level of functioning and over events that affect their lives” (p. 118). This definition casts a wide net for self-efficacy, implying that it determines people’s feelings about themselves as well as their thoughts, behaviors, and motivations. Bandura also claims that people with a strong self-efficacy approach challenges head on instead of trying to avoid them (Cox, 2006). This approach sounds quite similar to Dweck’s (2016) description of how growth mindset-minded people approach challenges and failures. In fact, Bandura (1993) speaks to the concept of fixed and growth mindsets in that “some children regard ability as an acquirable skill that can be increased” and that children with this belief “seek challenges that provide opportunities to expand” (p. 120).

Identity Theories

“Failing to revise our understanding of ourselves prevents us from seeing our reality.”—May et al. (2012, p. 33)

Many theoretical lenses and concepts shed light on identity but those that stand out most to me are social identity theory, identity theory, role-identity salience, social categorization, and self-concept. Two overarching themes are found in identity literature. First, there is the question of *who am I?*, which then leads to *how should I act?* (Alvesson et al., 2008). This first theme asks the question of identity in relation to the world around us, after all, “people derive a part of their self-concept from the social groups and categories they belong to” (Hogg & Reid, 2006, pp. 8-9).

Second, there exists this belief in individuality—especially in Western societies (Hogg & Reid, 2006)—that we each hold unique experiences and perspectives, which contribute to our own self-definition. Callero (1985) noted that “individual variation is made possible because each self reflects a unique perspective of social structure based on unique patterns of social relations” (p. 203), resulting in a unique combination of social categories (Stets & Burke, 2000). Notice how even this second theme of *uniqueness* is dependent on our experience with the wider world.

Social identity theory and identity theory assert that identity is formed through the process of self-categorization or identification, respectively (Stets & Burke, 2000). Social identity theory delineates the formation of *in-group* and *out-group* based on social categorization and labeling. In being a part of the in-group, one finds community and self-esteem. We view others within that category or group more positively, whereas our tendency to form an out-group results in enhanced negative judgments of anyone that falls outside of our group. The formation of in-group bias is “central” to human behavior (Fu et al., 2012, p. 1).

This development of in-group vs. out-group becomes even more complex considering how a unique “set of social identities” makes up a person’s self-concept, (Stets & Burke, 2000, p. 225). Furthermore, role-identity salience—the notion that some identities “are more a part of the self than others” (Callero, 1985, p. 203)—plays a part in determining which groups we feel more akin to. Therefore, the hierarchical nature of role-identity salience plays a large part in our self-definition; while we might categorize ourselves as being a part of multiple

in-groups, we certainly have a unique hierarchy of how we identify and which groups we identify with more.

This categorization of self, while seemingly necessary to provide identity context and meaning, often leads to stereotyping and prejudice (Steele & Aronson, 1995; Hogg & Reid, 2006). This approach applies to not only how people view out-groups but also when people are a part of an in-group that has widespread stereotypes. Steele and Aronson (1995) found that simply checking off boxes indicating race or sex can trigger negative stereotypes and, as a result, cause lower test scores. They found that society's negative images of different groups (i.e., African American criminal portrayals in movies and news reports, women not being good at science or math) can cause people within stereotyped groups to internalize "inferiority anxiety" and worry about confirming those stereotypes (p. 797). Dweck (2016) noted that this inferiority anxiety primarily happens to people who have a fixed mindset, thinking that their individual traits are fixed and also feeling as if they inherit the weight of their group's perceived traits.

How These Lenses Relate to My Journey

"Life, at its best, is a flowing, changing process in which nothing is fixed."

—Rogers and Kramer (1995, p. 28)

Findings from the literature for each of these lenses are scattered throughout this capstone because these findings have provided valuable concepts to increase my understanding and language to describe my own experience. Growth mindset has given me a framework through which to filter my response to adversity. Adult learning theories have helped validate my aha

moments and the outcomes of this transformative learning experience. Identity theories and concepts have reframed how I think of my own identity as well as how I view group membership and group dynamics.

Literature is a powerful resource but so, too, is personal experience. It is one thing to see quantitative data and measurable statistical values but another thing entirely to hear about one's own experiences that give substance to theory. In the next chapter I share details of my own journey to provide that personalized aspect that the literature sometimes withholds.

CHAPTER 3

AHA! THE MOMENTS THAT ALTERED MY JOURNEY'S COURSE

“Most people do not wish to accept that the order governing their lives is imaginary, but in fact every person is born into a pre-existing imagined order, and his or her desires are shaped from birth by its dominant myths.” (p. 114)
“There is no way out of the imagined order. When we break down our prison walls and run towards freedom, we are in fact running into the more spacious exercise yard of a bigger prison.” —Harari (2018, p. 118)

So what do we do with the imagined order? Do we accept it as it is, trusting that those before us established it with divine authority or at the very least were directed by wisdom that surpasses our own understanding? Do we trust that natural processes guide us collectively and individually? Do we scrutinize every aspect of existence in search of a better way? Do we even try to conceive of a way out of the imagined order if our own imagination is limited by its implied and inherited boundaries? Is the attempt to change the imagined order part of a myth that the individual holds such power?

These are the kinds of questions I began to consider throughout my time in the OD program, especially as I encountered the *what*, the *how*, and the *when* that led to my aha moments. The evolving self that is me—in all dimensions, imagined or otherwise—experienced multiple times the perfect storm, which led to several aha moments. With growth mindset playing a central role along with several other lenses adopted as I progressed through the program, I came to four key insights. First, I realized perspective is everything. Second, I recognized the importance of confronting myself, and doing so often. Third, I began to understand and see organizations in a different way. And fourth, I found a

passion in coaching. Not all of these *moments* were instantaneous. My sometimes gradual understanding of them developed through obsessive self-reflection. Through this self-reflection, heavily aided by readings and conversations, what I thought were isolated moments ended up rippling into other related breakthroughs. Parker et al. (2020) underscore the importance of context for the reflexive learner; the OD program was instrumental in providing a context that was challenging yet positive.

I emphasize self-reflection, but these breakthroughs would not have been so significant without me taking action. Argyris (2004) notes, “effective learning is an important cause of effective action,” and since reflection is a major part of learning, scholars recommend that we continually reflect on our actions (p. 507). I was willing to engage in the learning process that leads to action, particularly as outlined in Kolb’s learning cycle—taking me from concrete experience to reflective observation to abstract conceptualization and, finally, to active experimentation before looping back through the cycle (Jarvis, 2018).

Perception Is Reality, Perspective Is Everything

Merriam-Webster’s Dictionary defines perception as “a result of observation; physical sensation interpreted in the light of experience” (Perception, definition 1a, 3b). The dictionary defines perspective as “the interrelation in which a subject or its parts are mentally viewed” (Perspective, definition 2a). Building upon these definitions, perception—how one understands the world in light of one’s subjective experiences—is essentially one’s reality,

which leads to how they see the world—their point of view—or their perspective. In this way, perception and perspective are interconnected.

I began thinking more about the interrelatedness and meaning of these concepts in a class that focused on diversity and inclusion (Floyd & Legatt, 2019). This class highlighted the importance of every perspective. It made me think of my own experience and the value of having one foot in each culture that I identify with—the value of having multiple perspectives, the necessity to keep an open mind and continue expanding my own perspective, and the need to invite other perspectives. As a result of this shifting understanding, other realizations sprouted, such as my need to move away from absolutes, the value of positive self-talk, and the value of discomfort.

This was my first aha moment—that perspective is everything—and it became significant in that it began erasing many concepts that I had accepted as absolute truths. Enter social constructivism (Leeds-Hurwitz, 2009 as cited in Amineh & Asl, 2015), which theorizes about our way of constructing meaning together and making sense of the world:

This theory assumes that understanding, significance, and meaning are developed in coordination with other human beings. The most important elements in this theory are (a) the assumption that human beings rationalize their experience by creating a model of the social world and the way that it functions and, (b) the belief in language as the most essential system through which humans construct reality. (p. 13)

This theory gave me the language—itsself a social construct—to understand how many things I had accepted as indisputable laws of nature are, in fact, social

constructs, varying from one culture to the next and ranging anywhere on the spectrum from the macro-societal level to the micro-organizational level.

One example of a cultural norm from my own experience shows how social constructs are all around. In every culture certain actions or inactions are considered rude. A person joining a social gathering in Guatemala—and many other Central and South American countries—can expect everyone in that space to individually welcome the person who just entered the room, regardless of if that person is a stranger or not. This person is expected to walk around and physically greet each person in the room. Similarly, when one walks into an elevator or waiting room with strangers, it would be rude if each individual did not state a general greeting (i.e., “Good afternoon”). These behaviors are not the expectation in most settings in the United States. In fact, even making eye contact with a stranger on public transportation in some northeastern cities in the United States is considered rude.

The OD program encouraged me to engage in a process that reflects and evaluates social constructs in a practical and authentic way: practical because it usefully expanded my understanding of the intricacies within organizational dynamics such as underlying structures, organizational culture and unspoken norms, the use for and limitations of organizational metaphors, and the value of keeping a stranger’s perspective, and authentic because every course I took in the OD program required reflection papers. It is very difficult, if not outright counterintuitive, to engage in self-reflection in an inauthentic way. Reflecting is vital to the learning process (Parker et al., 2020). Not only do we learn from

reflecting on our experiences, but also by challenging ourselves to reflect on how we are “maintaining a certain reality and how one might critique some of the taken-for-granted understandings of this construction” (p. 294).

Money, borders, boundaries, states, government, laws, titles, gender, religion, language, and cultural norms are all social constructs that I previously accepted without question—and are only a few of the many social constructs that human societies have created over time as a way to relate to each other and function at the most basic level. However, Sagan (1997) reminds us how important it is to question even the most widely accepted things:

That the Earth is flat was once obvious. That heavy bodies fall faster than light ones was once obvious. That blood-sucking leeches cure most diseases was once obvious. That some people are naturally and by divine decree slaves was once obvious... The truth may be puzzling or counterintuitive. It may contradict deeply held beliefs. (pp. 39-40)

As a society, we put our collective faith in these constructs and trust the processes they create and the order they provide (Harari, 2018). Without diminishing the value that social constructs and various myths provide to societies in many ways, it has been an important process for me to recognize these constructs and ponder their value as well as their negative influence. Of those mentioned above, religious tenets have been what I have most needed to deconstruct (i.e., pull apart, make sense of, tear down, unlearn).

Moving Away From Absolutes

Religion often places an emphasis on answers. After all, a religion that cannot provide life’s most sought after answers might not gain much of a following. While I cannot claim responsibility for the initial cracks in my religious

walls, I will admit, consistent with all other forms of my unlearning (Mezirow, 2018), I am responsible for allowing those cracks to widen and eventually using a sledgehammer to finish the job. If it sounds as if I did this lightly or joyfully, I did not. In fact, for years I made every excuse to avoid doing this.

Those familiar walls gave my life meaning since I can remember; they provided certainty and security, and they gave me solidarity with hundreds of millions around the world who identified as the same faith. Not only did it provide these benefits but moving away from this faith would come at a great cost: losing friends and alienating family, not to mention losing my sense of certainty. If it provided all these benefits and would prove so costly for me, why would I intentionally tear it all down? I can identify several reasons.

First, I could not believe vital doctrines anymore; they were no longer compatible with who I was becoming. Second, it made me see the worst in people, which is antithetical to who I am. Third, I began noticing my own cognitive dissonance and could no longer ignore it. Fourth, it caused personal trauma. Fifth, I began seeing and hearing the trauma it caused to others. Finally, it claims to accept all as they are but, in fact, it places conditional value on human life, which results in exclusive ideology, dehumanization, and demonization of anyone that does not fit the mold—and again, this is antithetical to who I am. As a result, my mind began moving toward a more natural, unforced frame of thinking: scales of grey, even a color spectrum—anything but the limitation of the black and white dualistic thinking required to function within the boundaries of my former faith.

The connection between my faith deconstruction and the OD program begins with the program's use of nontraditional frameworks and perspectives. The program is filled with courses (Floyd & Legatt, 2019; Arena & Benjamin, 2019; Ostrowski, 2019; Subramanian, 2020; Pennington et al., 2019-2020; Mulgrew & McAdam, 2021) that challenged me to view aspects of life in a different light and to reject one-size-fits all solutions. As with each aha moment I experienced, this mindset change shows that as influential as the OD program has been academically and professionally, it is at least as impactful on my personal life.

The Power of Words, Positive Self-Talk

The power of words is something that I became acutely aware of during my time in the OD program. This is not a new concept to me. After all, this knowledge is one of the reasons I make an intentional effort to constantly offer encouragement to others. What has increasingly surfaced is the power of self-talk—how I speak to myself and about myself—and its far-reaching effects (Bellomo et al., 2020). Whether that self-talk is positive or negative, it has the power to influence a person's emotional affect and tone (Budd & Rothstein, 2000).

This realization became clearer while reading about Budd and Rothstein's (2000) work, stating, "your words play a critical role in determining your moods, health and happiness" (p. 1). They wrote about Fernando Flores, a man who was imprisoned and separated from his family, yet because of the power of words, he was transformed for the better. He emerged from prison with the knowledge that

words can literally change not just your mentality but your physiology as well. Evidence of the psychophysiological impact of self-talk is well documented (Bellomo et al., 2020).

Frankl's (1992) story of survival through the Holocaust in Nazi Germany also serves as an incredible example of human resilience and determination. Even in describing a time he spent in the sick ward of a concentration camp, he shares how the prisoners, crowded on bunk beds, were happy to not have to work, "how content we were; happy in spite of everything" (p. 59). What role did self-talk and mindset play in such unthinkable and unimaginable circumstances? They certainly played vital roles for the few who survived, though I will leave further speculation to those survivors who have shared their stories.

As for me, I try not to take myself too seriously, so I often use humor and make jokes at my own expense. In retrospect, the self-deprecating humor has been detrimental to my personal and professional growth. I sometimes say to others, "I'm still a kid, barely an adult," or "I'm not even a professional," or "I'm not sure what I could offer." As happens with self-deprecating humor, these comments were made as jokes to humanize myself and make myself relatable. But subconsciously, they had a dehumanizing impact on how I viewed myself.

These words I spoke out loud became the words I spoke internally, so they had become a form of self-sabotage. They minimize and invalidate my experience. They feed my self-esteem lies of inadequacy. After years and years of repeating these phrases for the sake of a laugh or a reaction, I can look back and see how these words have impacted my self-confidence. In the past, even

when people would comment disapproval or concern for the way I spoke about myself, I could not see the detrimental effects these words had on my outlook and mood. Now, as a result of the wisdom imparted through stories such as Flores's and Frankl's, I am speaking to myself differently. And as a result of that, I am seeing those benefits of "greater effectiveness, greater satisfaction and a better mood" (Budd & Rothstein, 2000, p. 6).

Words matter, even if what is spoken is not said out loud. In a way those words matter more because they contain my true feelings about myself, others, and the world around me. I am familiarizing myself with my inner dialogue, often conversing with what I now perceive to be my unconscious.

The Value of Discomfort, Confronting Fear

Leaning into discomfort has yielded positive results for me over the course of my time in the OD program. To me, leaning in means doing things that push my boundaries, doing things I never thought I would be able to, and trusting my growth mindset. For me, even adopting a growth mindset means trusting that I have the capacity to grow, to improve, to face my fears, and to trust that stretching myself in these ways will impact me for the better. Entering the program, I had fears of inadequacy that my experience could not offer value to the conversation. What I was feeling is normally termed imposter syndrome—the feeling of not belonging, as if we are somehow faking it and desperately trying to not be found out as an outsider (Breeze, 2018).

Through extensive self-reflection and encouragement from classmates and professors, I have come to recognize the value of my experiences and the

value of my perspective. One way this happened is through reflecting on my experience growing up—my family dynamics and the social and cultural dynamics involved. I was used to minimizing this experience for the sake of fitting in, but I came to realize the value of this experience and the unique perspective it could offer me within organizations. Another way I came to recognize the value of my experience is when a classmate noticed how desperately I was trying to be unnoticed; this classmate implored that I give voice to my thoughts. It was a genuine and heartfelt request, and it was the first time in an academic setting that anyone had explicitly said that my voice and perspective was needed.

In the past I had stopped myself from speaking up in work meetings or classroom discussions, but now I have the confidence to offer my perspective regularly. This behavior change has come also as a result of intensive work to counter the devil on my shoulder that spews out my faults and inadequacies. Now I want to believe my emboldened inner voice stating that I am capable.

As noted in Chapter 1, I do not like being the center of attention, which has fed my intense, lifelong fear of public speaking; just the thought of it would result in mental distress and physical ailment, even weeks or months before an engagement. I once immediately dropped and walked out of an undergraduate elective as the professor was reading over the syllabus; the professor mentioned each student would give two 5-minute presentations during the semester. Upon entering the OD program, I knew I would have to face my fear of speaking publicly. However, adopting a growth mindset meant I could no longer avoid this debilitating fear.

Since entering the program, I have given several presentations in almost every class, including a 60-minute presentation. I gave a 60-minute presentation in Ostrowski's (2019) in-depth review of coaching theories class on the theories of intelligence and their practical application in executive coaching. Leading up to the presentation, I had brief spells of nausea and indigestion when thinking about the presentation, though these symptoms had begun to lessen as a result of having given several shorter presentations in other classes and my implementation of mindfulness and positive self-talk.

I believe mindfulness had begun to rewire the synapses in my brain that historically chose flight over fight (Congleton et al., 2018). I noticed about 5 minutes into the presentation my voice had stopped shaking and my body was no longer tense. This realization, the knowledge that my body and mind would adjust to the situation, has carried me with confidence into every public speaking situation since then.

I know there is no magic formula in facing one's fears, though I will say that having a growth mindset gave me the ability to remove myself from the situation and view this fear from a high-level perspective. I had no choice but to face the fear because facing the fear meant I was growing in some way. I was no longer allowing the fear to dictate my actions. I view non-life-threatening fears in a completely different way now: When I become consciously aware of a fear, I do not run away from it; I run toward it. I credit this completely to a restructured mindset, my growth mindset.

What does running toward fear look like for me? It looks like entering a rigorous program, knowing it will challenge me beyond what I think I can handle in that present frame of reference. It looks like facing and addressing belief structures—even at the risk of enormous loss. It looks like applying for and accepting a position that requires regularly speaking in front of large groups.

Suffice to say that perception and perspective have sprouted into related aha moments that have impacted me well beyond the intellectual level. Moving away from absolutes and dualistic thinking has helped me view things in a spectrum and approach problem-solving from outside the one-size-fits-all limitation. The power of positive self-talk has allowed me to gain confidence and self-worth. Having a growth mindset and viewing mistakes and failures as learning opportunities (Dweck, 2016) meant adjusting my perspective to see the value of leaning into discomfort by actively seeking challenges and facing my fears. Choosing fight over flight led me to the next aha moment.

Confronting Myself

Each class in the OD program challenged me from different angles, and I began to see clearly the dire need to confront myself. In particular, in my *Leading From the Center* class (Arena & Benjamin, 2019), reading Fritz's (1989) book *The Path of Least Resistance* had a profound effect on me in terms of inviting me into the vulnerable space of self-confrontation. A small encouragement from my professor, Dr. Sharon Benjamin, was all I needed to take up the challenge of confronting myself beyond the confines of class assignments. She said all she needed to say by simply stating these words: "Be brave."

Finding the Path of Least Resistance

How do I confront myself? I journal. I engaging in the self-reflective process. I practice mindfulness. I actively engaged in mindfulness in several of my classes (Arena & Benjamin, 2019; Ostrowski, 2019; Subramanian, 2020); doing so brought about such positive energy and clarity that I decided to practice this on my own time.

At times I feel myself getting too deep into my line of questioning and the resulting thoughts, but that is not a bad thing, only something I have learned to navigate as I exercise the muscle. Dr. Sharon Benjamin, my professor, shared an insight that has stuck with me when I try to convince myself to stop asking the difficult questions: “If you prepare and push for your space to be bigger in the calm, you will have solid grounding for when times are difficult.” Barstow and Benjamin (2019) echo the same sentiment in saying that slowing down in the moment is sometimes necessary to go fast more productively later.

In my *Leading From the Center* course, Arena and Benjamin (2019) talked about living selfishly, selflessly, and self-fully. My professors stated that living selfishly and selflessly both take great effort and, ultimately, are a fiction; but living a self-full life should be almost effortless as if living within the path of least resistance. It is a lousy way to live selfishly—make myself happy—but I am left feeling alone. It is a lousy way to live selflessly—make others happy—but I am left feeling empty.

I have been learning to live self-fully, but as Robert Fritz wrote, I can only reach this through the creative process. I must continually allow myself to enter

the creative process—journal, free write, meditate, practice mindfulness, read, observe, engage with nature, engage with myself, and try new things. The creative process invites me to enter the creative space that sparks outside-of-the-box thoughts. I often reside comfortably within the closed and circular system that Harari's words presented at the beginning of this chapter; Fritz (1989) shares that the only way to exit is to create a different structure:

If it seems to you that this is a closed and circular system, you are right. If you attempt to solve, change, break through, transform, accept, reject, or avoid this structure, all you will do is reinforce it. As long as you try to make changes from within the reactive-responsive orientation, you will remain within that orientation. (p. 30)

This idea of living self-fully is not unlike the Buddha's invitation to seek the Middle Path—to find the balance between rigidity and pleasure-seeking—or Aristotle's urging to engage and partake in moderation (Sachs, 2012). These two thought leaders, like many wise philosophers and intellectual leaders, suggest a path between extremes.

Dr. Michael Arena once noted that “courage is looking in the mirror and confronting your own wicked self” (Arena & Benjamin, 2019). So not only does the OD program subtly invite me, but often professors share compelling personal stories that encourage me to face myself, to look in the mirror—even, and especially, if I do not want to see what is staring back so plainly, often revealing uncomfortable truths about myself. In accepting this invitation, I look at my entire self, the things I admire about myself as well as the ugly parts of me.

Historically, my methods for confronting and addressing aspects that I do not like about myself have always been within a closed system; I approach things

from within the reactive-responsive orientation that Fritz discusses. Problem-solving does little more than buy us more time (Fritz, 1989). When I look over the past 10 years, some of my biggest struggles remain when addressing issues within the reactive-response orientation. This insight is why Fritz's idea that we tend to oscillate within an inherently ineffective structure struck a significant chord within me. He shares that within this ineffective structure, your problems will continue to resurface even when you think you have solved them; "you will always have a new problem if you do not know how to create what you want" (Fritz, 1989, p. 45).

The OD program has provided the language as well as the tools to address my oscillating tendencies. One of these tools that has shed light on who I am is the Values in Action Inventory (VIA) Strengthsfinder, which suggested that my top character strengths are kindness and generosity, forgiveness and mercy, gratitude, capacity to love and be loved, and humor and playfulness. I recognize these qualities in myself but appreciated that the assessment worded the results as *character strengths*. I have observed these qualities in myself before but did not necessarily always view them as strengths.

Another tool that shed light on identity is my Emergenetics profile (Browning & Williams, 2019). This tool was introduced to me at the beginning of the Organizational Consulting and Executive Coaching (OCEC) cohort (Pennington et al., 2019). The profile results gave me a greater understanding of how I relate to groups and how I respond in different situations, showing that I am

social, but not expressive or assertive, which means I am flexible, relational, and listen well—all characteristics that complement my coaching toolkit.

Uncovering Biases

Another aspect of confronting myself is to unveil unconscious biases that I hold. Experts believe that “the ability to have conscious access to our minds is quite low;” one Nobel Prize–winning neuroscientist estimates that 80% to 90% of our minds work unconsciously (Banaji & Greenwald, 2016, p. 61). In attempts to uncover some of these unconscious biases, I took what is known as the Implicit Association Test (IAT), which helps to uncover part of this unconscious side. My IAT results, accompanied by group discussions with classmates, offered valuable insights for me. The test results accomplished two things: (1) they confirmed certain biases I am already very aware of, and (2) they shed light on blind spots I was missing in previous self-evaluations.

The two test results that least surprised me indicated I have a strong automatic preference for dark-skinned people over light-skinned people, but I moderately associate weapons with black Americans and harmless objects with white Americans.

These results showed a rigid dichotomy in my thinking. Why do I show automatic preference for dark-skinned people but at the same time associate weapons with black people? Is it a result of media portrayal of black people in movies, crime tv shows, and news coverage? Am I deflecting my own responsibility by thinking this way? My intention is not to deflect, at least not consciously. However, I do believe it is important to recognize we are not isolated

beings. We did not enter into being with preconceived notions and ideas; our biases are very much influenced and produced within the context of the world around us.

Banaji and Greenwald (2016) stated that “whether we want them to or not, the attitudes of the culture at large infiltrate us” (p. 68). Despite this fact, I do not absolve myself of responsibility for how I react to the endless flow of information that I absorb. I cannot claim ignorance, especially after I become aware of the biases that I hold. The results of the IAT tests I took have further prompted me to constantly question my automatic thoughts and inclinations.

The OD program offered the space to have candid discussions with classmates and faculty, reminding me of the value of having discussions with a diverse group—all kinds of diversity, including race, gender identity, age, experience, ability, and education. Much of my first class in the program (Floyd & Legatt, 2019) was focused on diversity and inclusion initiatives, which produced vibrant discussions in a class divided fairly evenly between white and minorities, male and female, and led by a male African American professor and a female white professor. One of the revealing perspectives shared by an African American classmate was her IAT unconscious bias results showed she views white people more positively than black people. The conversation blossomed into other classmates sharing similar results, for this and other IAT tests we took. The discussion was valuable because it provided the opportunity to speak freely about a complex topic that is not often spoken about openly between diverse groups.

Diversity of all kinds promises diversity of thought. The diversity of thought yields variety in ideas, including ideas on how to reach solutions (Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2016). One of the advantages of diversity is that it provides a large collective lens through which a group gets to see the world (Phillips, 2014); it gives us the benefit of seeing how many paths can lead to a solution, and ours might not be the best way. Phillips (2014) noted that “people who are different from one another in race, gender and other dimensions bring unique information and experiences to bear on the task at hand” (para. 7). It takes humility and a desire to promote inclusion to have these conversations with others; but, if nothing else, my reflection group experience showed me that I should not and cannot stop having these dialogues.

We all have biases. Interestingly, as noted above, we also hold biases against the very groups we are a part of or those we feel most affinity toward (Banaji & Greenwald, 2016). For example, Banaji and Greenwald share about a gay activist interviewed by Shankar Vedantam. After the activist took an IAT, her results showed that she had “stronger gay = bad associations than gay = good associations” (p. 56). IAT results of young versus old people yield similar results when taken by older people. According to Banaji and Greenwald, although these older test takers expressed in interviews that they view old people favorably, their IAT unconscious bias results indicated otherwise. Therefore, being part of a group does not necessarily mean that our implicit biases favor that group.

Pallais (2017) talks about the effect that management bias has on minorities once they are hired, but even in the hiring process minorities face

discrimination. Data show that minorities are less likely to get callbacks and ultimately less likely to be hired, “even with the same credentials as other candidates” (Pallais, 2017, para. 1). Pallais (2017) conducted research in a French grocery store chain and found that minorities do not perform as well when working with biased managers (para. 6). When working with unbiased managers, minority employees ranked in the 79th percentile of worker performance, whereas non-minority employees performed the same under biased and unbiased managers (Pallais, 2017, para. 7-8). Pallais (2017) found that minorities did not perform as well, but not due to bad treatment. It turned out biased managers spent less time managing them directly, so their productivity subsequently dropped (para. 9-10).

Williams (2017) noted that an organization’s failure to confront bias or offensive behavior creates a general feeling that the behavior is somehow acceptable (para. 3). This finding is a dangerous precedent because it allows for people who commit offense to feel empowered since they are not reprimanded, and it drives already marginalized employees further away from the whole—group, organization, and mainstream society. According to Williams (2017), “patterns of unchecked biased and offensive behavior in the workplace have the potential to erode full employee participation and take a toll on organizational effectiveness” (para. 4). We cannot leave biased behavior unchecked, but we must be careful in how we confront it. Even when we disagree with people, we have to be willing to listen so we can allow for an “environment where all voices are heard and respected” (Williams, 2017, para. 11).

Organizations should not avoid the difficult conversations—this is something I’ve learned during in-class discussions, which ended up being incredibly valuable for our cohesion as classmates. Barstow and Benjamin (2019) stated that “discomfort is an indicator that something important is being engaged” (p. 8). Yet another class example is from Havelly and Warren’s (2021) social media class, a space in which students were encouraged and even probed at times by the faculty to engage in difficult topics such as race, gender, LGBTQ+ and other human rights, and police brutality.

Although it is a classroom environment, these conversations provided us with prime examples of discussing the issues, even passionately at times but always with mutual respect—respect is integral (Badaracco & Ellesworth, 1989). Discussions centered on polarizing topics allow individuals to voice what is important to bring to light—again, with underlying respect—without allowing the issue to fester and grow into the dreaded, unspoken elephant in the room.

Social scientists Ruderman et al. (2010) stress that we must have these conversations because organizations that do are better positioned to deal with the root of the problem from the beginning (p. 101). They also stress the danger of choosing to take a hands-off approach, stating that doing so most certainly results in the underlying problems remaining (Ruderman et al., 2010, p. 107); what could have been dealt with at its inception threatens to become a chronic organizational problem.

It is safe to say I took Dr. Arena’s bait and Dr. Benjamin’s invitation to confront myself (Arena & Benjamin, 2019). It is a vulnerable thing—even just

sharing these intimate details in print—but it has been instrumental in my own journey of personal growth. This habit of confronting myself is a personal choice that has brought about meaningful introspection. But, again, I am not an island, and this self-confrontation plays into group dynamics and how I understand and interact with organizations.

Understanding Organizations in a Different Light

True to its intended purpose, the OD program led me to see and experience organizations in a different way. It shed light on the value of creating space for myself and for others, it helped me spot if diversity and inclusion efforts are genuine attempts or for show, and it helped me see the value in forming the consultant's toolkit and using metaphor and lenses to better understand organizations.

The Obligation to Create Space for Myself and Others

Certainly, to create space, whatever that may look like, has inherent value—space for myself and for others, space for differences and for likeness, space in all its boundless forms. Creating this space is an obligation, a must for any organization. It is the organization's responsibility to set the tone for this space through policy but, as importantly, through action. Leadership must walk the talk in implementing what norms are accepted and swiftly counter unacceptable behaviors (Badaracco & Ellesworth, 1989). Leadership's approach in this area will lend to the overall organizational culture. This is not to say organizational culture is simply up to leadership to change—after all, culture is the most difficult thing to transform, even when the key players know it needs

changing (Tushman & O'Reilly, 1996). The obligation also lays in the hands of the collective, each individual participating in a very intentional and conscientious construction of the space they want to experience.

Emergence. I experienced this aha moment—the need for space—during a class toward the beginning of my time in the OD program (Arena & Benjamin, 2019). The class allowed for what my professors term *emergence*, that which results from enabling myself and others to have an adaptive space. It is the deliberate creation of a new order in an environment that is ready for change, which results in the emergence of something that did not exist before (Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2016). Emergence came about for me in this class when the professors invited us into this adaptive space through practicing group mindfulness—they termed this space *the circle*. As part of the circle, I came to realize that in order to connect to reality, I must consciously remove myself from reality from time to time. What does this mean? Well, consistent with much of my journey through the OD program, it involves practicing mindfulness, becoming more aware, and inviting clarity. As Barstow and Benjamin (2019) noted, this level of awareness is often painful, but helps in “accurately mapping both our skills and deficits” (p. 8).

Emergence also came about by engaging in the creative process. I experienced this process in Ostrowski's (2019) class when a classmate invited the class into a narrative coaching exercise. She asked us to imagine our best selves. What would that look like? Who is that person? Is that person my highest self? What's stopping me from being that person? The emergence here came in realizing I could be who I wanted to be, and the greatest barrier tends to be me.

I also experienced emergence in the first class of the OCEC cohort (Pennington et al., 2019), again by engaging in the creative process. This time it involved imagining my strengths and giving them a visual representation. I imagined a transparent, pink cloth flowing in the wind over the ocean. I visualized a color that, to me, represents serenity. Although this cloth, flowing in the wind, is subject to the elements and changes shape, its integrity and character are intact—no matter the external environment.

The emergence I experienced was closely followed by the conviction to consistently enable this space for myself and for others. One of the difficulties in allowing for this space with others is that organizations are complex and have many moving parts. Another difficulty is that organizations tend to overly focus on accepted ideas and what is considered “normal” (Barstow & Benjamin, 2019); this alone can close off new, emergent pathways.

Being a part of a complex organization requires an open mind. I began to realize that although traditional styles and practices have their place, enabling and holding a space for emergent ideas and practices is the way forward—it has always been the way forward. Tushman and O’Reilly (1996) noted that if organizations are to grow or even survive, they must reorient themselves to accommodate the environmental conditions that are bound to change.

Jack Welch, the former CEO of General Electric, once said that “the winners will be entire companies that have developed cultures that, instead of fearing the pace of change, relish it” (Tushman & O’Reilly, 1996, p. 20). This means that organizations must capitalize on dynamic tension, the tension

between the operational side that usually holds on to traditional procedures and the entrepreneurial pockets that push traditional boundaries beyond comfort. People are always going to disagree about how to do things, but how will organizations make the most of this tension? Pretend it is not there? Suppress the dissenters? The key should not be to get everyone to agree. In fact, it is essential that we disagree at times, holding space for diverse perspectives (Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2016, p. 13) and holding the tension (Barstow & Benjamin, 2019); this is where emergence is born.

The operational side and the entrepreneurial side are codependent. However, for each side, the other is its natural enemy. For the organization as a whole, both sides are essential. Barstow and Benjamin (2019) stress that the goal should not be to resolve this tension, but rather to understand how to best navigate and engage with this complex dynamic. Each side instinctively views these processes very differently because individually they function in very different realities that are threatened by the other side's existence.

Additionally, we must recognize that our individual differences in areas such as ethnic background, religion, beliefs, upbringing, lived experience, and education—even just between two people, let alone an entire organization—make it difficult for us to see the same situation similarly (Badaracco, 1998). Therefore, even when people share similar experiences, the ways they interpret and react to the experience can be diametrically opposed.

Diversity and Inclusion

Diversity and inclusion efforts are another large part of my learning in the OD program and an important piece of understanding the organizational puzzle more thoroughly. The conversational essence of the program alone proved the value of diversity, fostering discussions within groups that contained all kinds of diversity. Before experiencing Floyd and Legatt's (2019) class, I thought of diversity within racial and ethnic parameters. As a result of the class, I see diversity all around me now in all its categorical variety.

Naturally, broadening my understanding of diversity tied in perfectly with the second area of our focus, inclusivity. I learned that by furthering our collective understanding of diversity—and in a sense making diversity boundless—we create the necessary space for inclusion. Promoting diversity alone is not enough. Activist Verna Myers puts it this way: "Diversity is being invited to the party. Inclusion is being asked to dance" (Sherbin & Rashid, 2017). Bourke et al. (2017) share the same sentiment, noting these efforts should go well beyond assembling diverse teams and into actually promoting all voices and ensuring everyone is heard and respected.

Using Metaphor to Understand and Lenses to See Organizations

The OD program gave me an invaluable vantage point in understanding organizations through metaphor. One of the advantages of seeing organizations through metaphor is that it provides the visual to see complex organizations in a relatable way. The primary means through which I received this gift was through the OCEC cohort (Pennington et al., 2019) and Morgan's (2006) book *Images of Organizations*. Additionally, I acquired and learned how to understand lenses

through which to view organizations in a course that focuses on organizational consulting (Subramanian, 2019). Without metaphors and lenses, my consulting toolkit would be rather empty, lacking the language to form certain concepts; they drive how I consume information both within and outside of organizations.

Metaphor. Morgan (2006) proposes many different metaphors that we can use to view organizations. The three metaphors that stand out to me most are organizations as organisms, brains, and cultures. Metaphor can only go so far in providing the necessary imagery to understand something more fully. In my mind, this is why it is important to have multiple metaphors to fill the gaps.

In viewing organizations as organisms, we view them within a broader context, recognizing they do not stand alone. Organizations can be viewed narrowly or out of context sometimes, not considering an implied degree of interdependence between the organization and their environment. Just as organisms are interconnected, so, too, are organizations. Viewing organizations as organisms helps us recognize they are not isolated entities and are rarely self-sufficient. Morgan (2006) explains that organizations are simply elements within a much larger, complex ecosystem. Not only are they dependent parts of a greater environment that are influenced by their environment, but these organizations also have the capacity and necessity to evolve because of their environment.

If we think of organizations as brains, the hope is to create intelligent, continuously learning organizations. Within this view, Morgan (2006) emphasizes the need for growth, change, and development as a result of the organization's experiences. A fascinating aspect in contemplating the brain metaphor is also

considering the brain's holographic and specialized characteristics.

Holographically, if any part of an organization is broken, another piece can be used to reconstruct the fractured area. The brain is also specialized, similar to organizations. Ideally, each part of an organization is complementary to the other parts, some bringing right-brain dominance, other parts bringing left-brain dominance. The emphasis here is that the whole brain—the whole organization—cannot fully thrive without each side completing their tasks and serving their complementary problem-solving roles.

The cultural metaphor is also one I gravitate toward because of the many dynamics at play. When we speak of culture, we refer to traditions, ideologies, laws, values, unspoken norms, and day-to-day practices that are systematically and structurally engrained (Morgan, 2006). The culture metaphor is more concrete than other metaphors in that it is more solidified in the aforementioned factors, which are vital pieces in the organizational puzzle and society at large. The inherently unquestioned and unspoken nature of many cultural aspects makes change, even when the need for change is acknowledged, very difficult. Morgan (2006) noted that “effective organizational change always implies cultural change. Changes in technology, rules, systems, procedures, and policies are just not enough” (p. 145).

Lenses. Morgan's (2006) metaphors form the basis for the lenses through which I view organizations. As a consultant, I have landed upon certain lenses that I gravitate toward in viewing organizations: organism, culture, and narratives/stories. These are not the lenses that I use to view every organization,

but they do serve as my point of reference. Haan (2007) wisely advises we maintain a preferred approach that we believe in and that is consistent with our ideology as a consultant or coach. Sometimes my lenses might be culture, power, and politics. Other times it might be narrative and psychic prisons. Other situations might call for mechanistic and political lenses.

But are lenses and theories the only things we need to focus on in coaching and consulting? In coaching, Rogers (2016) goes so far as to hypothesize that the theoretical orientation or approach of the practitioner is far less important than focusing on creating equal footing for the parties involved and building rapport within the relationship. In consulting, Block (2011) emphasizes that the consultant's effectiveness is not dependent on technical expertise, but rather the consultant's ability to engage with the client on multiple levels and focus on aspects of the relationship such as trust and feelings.

Subramanian's (2020) course taught me about the importance of viewing the organization from all possible levels of the organization: individual (personal stories), interpersonal (communication, relationships), group (dynamics), and organizational (culture, implicit, high level). It is easy to get caught up in fitting all the data into the applicable metaphors and lenses, the high-level thinking, looking at group dynamics, and connecting the organization-wide dots. Maintaining a humanistic approach is vital; individuals make up the organization, so it is important to honor this and not abandon individual stories.

There is no one-size-fits-all, and I do not want to limit myself in diagnosing problems and offering solutions and an outside perspective. Morgan (2006)

describes this concept of no one-size-fits-all in that “there is no one best way of organizing” (p. 42). This idea comes from contingency theory, which emphasizes that the most appropriate form of organization depends on the organization’s environment and goals. Here, again, is another theory that lends to my evolving thought process, that there is no best way of _____ (fill in the blank). There are many ways to design, organize, implement, and consult. What may work best for an engineering firm could be disastrous for an accounting firm. One organization might thrive in a more mechanistic environment, while another could only succeed in a self-learning environment. In considering real-life experience and growing evidence, I am hard-pressed to find many examples in which one size does, in fact, fit all.

I also recognize the necessity of maintaining a stranger’s perspective when viewing organizations. I learned this insight in practice during my consulting field experience but also during a live case study (Subramanian, 2019). As Barstow and Benjamin (2019) noted, “we sometimes need to step out of the system, go to the edge, to see the true reflection of what is happening. When we are part of the system, we lose part of ourselves” (p. 6). Stepping out allows one to hold on to a semblance of objectivity, even as part of an organization.

The OD program seamlessly produced this aha moment for me—after all, shedding light on *organizational dynamics* is central to the curriculum. Throughout all of my courses the program wove a narrative of providing adaptive spaces (Arena & Benjamin, 2019; Barstow & Benjamin, 2019; Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2016), educating us on what true diversity and inclusion looks like (Floyd &

Legatt, 2019) and forming my consultant's toolkit (Subramanian, 2019; Morgan, 2006; Block, 2011). Consulting, however, is only one piece of the OCEC cohort (Pennington et al., 2019) that made up for half of my course load—the other half was coaching.

Experiencing Coaching, Finding a Passion

The OCEC cohort is structured in a way that maximizes the growth and learning experience for a new coach within an academic environment (Pennington et al., 2019). The faculty lay a strong foundation in evidence-based coaching theory as they integrate a simulated coaching environment. Coaching is a term that is thrown around carelessly, a role that has become vague in how it is used and how it is understood. The coaching tarp houses a variety of roles, but in this capstone and within the OD program, coaching refers to a very specific role, Executive Coaching. Rogers (2016) defines coaching as follows:

Coaching is the art of facilitating another person's learning, development, well-being and performance. Coaching raises self-awareness and identifies choices. Through coaching, people are able to find their own solutions, develop their own skills, and change their own attitudes and behaviors. The whole aim of coaching is to close the gap between people's potential and their current state. (p. 7)

This definition of coaching places much of the responsibility and heavy lifting on the client, also referred to as the coachee.

Coaching Initiation

The outset of my experience in one-on-one coaching was intimidating. As with anything new and unfamiliar, I was acutely aware of my incompetence in this new realm. This uncomfortable feeling was akin to being a poor swimmer in the deep end of the pool, having to remain outwardly calm even if inwardly I had

anxiety about the moment. These first coaching sessions were only 20 minutes long, though they felt much longer. Moving through that initial experience, I was overcome with a sense of pure gratitude—a feeling that has not diminished. I am always honored when a person, my coachee, invites me to listen to their story.

I discovered quickly that active listening is an essential component of coaching, not only to facilitate the client through relevant questioning but also to build trust. This is what Rogers (2016) refers to as “real rapport” in which the coach unconditionally accepts the coachee (p. 34). In this initial period, the most difficult thing to do was to not ask leading questions.

I try to be cognizant of Haan’s (2007) *Ten Commandments for the Executive Coach*, especially when I first began coaching as I moved from conscious incompetence to conscious competence (Ostrowski et al., 2019). The first commandment—*do no harm*—is one that I keep in mind throughout my coaching sessions, that “it is better to do nothing than carry out an intervention that may be harmful” (Haan, 2007, p. 52). Another commandment that stands out is to *look after yourself, to keep yourself as healthy as possible* (Haan, 2007). Until very recently this guidance has always been a struggle for me. Now, largely thanks to the process of becoming a coach and experiencing coaching as a client, I keep in mind that caring for others begins with self-care. My healthy appearance will also give the client confidence that I am a competent, healthy, and trustworthy coach (Haan, 2007).

I have been reminded in real time, while coaching on several occasions, that coaching forces the coach to face themselves. In many ways as coaches we

invite others to take an honest look at themselves when we ask facilitating questions that force deep, often uncomfortable introspection. If I am not willing to do the same as a coach, I cannot ask others to do so, and I should not expect their trust.

Coaching the Avatar

The moment I discovered coaching as a passion was in Pennington's (2020) class, during which I was in a coaching engagement paired as a classmate's coach. I realized I genuinely enjoyed facilitating others' growth through this type of engagement, especially when I observed my coachee's growth and the benefits they received from coaching.

For their privacy, I will refer to my coachee as Avatar. At this point of the cohort, we were practicing hour-long sessions, the expected time allotment for most coaching sessions. I mention the change in time here to note how we had started off with 20-minute sessions, which felt arduous at that time, and now were engaging in hour-long sessions, which would often come to feel too short. A vital precursor to my coaching engagement with Avatar was Ostrowski's (2019) class, which incorporated evidence-based coaching and gave me a thorough understanding of the theoretical implications and applications in coaching. This class provided the theoretical lenses along with how to use them in practice; it significantly expanded my coaching toolkit.

Humanistic. My coaching engagement with Avatar was based on the solid foundation of humanistic psychology. I consistently and

intentionally used each of Whybrow and Wildflower's (2011) coaching applications with Avatar.

First, I established collaboration with my client as the basis for our coaching relationship by making it just that: a relationship. From the beginning we established I was the facilitator, and while I would complete 360 interviews and a feedback report, Avatar would steer this ship. They would choose those they wanted me to interview for the 360 process. We would dive into what they wanted to dive into.

Second, this relationship would have mutual respect—a must for any coaching engagement. Whybrow & Wildflower (2011) stress the importance of relationship in saying that “it is the relationship, not necessarily the type of therapeutic intervention used, that produces a positive experience and growth” (pp. 5-6).

Third was empathetic listening. For me this meant being in the moment, and present in every sense. It meant asking for clarification or repeating back to my client to (1) show them I am listening, and (2) make sure I understand what is being shared with me.

Fourth, I brought my authentic self to the coaching relationship. Without being my authentic self in the coaching engagement, how could I ever ask the client to bring their authentic self? And without their authentic self, how can there be significant, real progress or growth? Bringing my authentic self was the first step in extending an inviting hand to Avatar to

trust me; it allowed us to break down walls. Avatar knew that I was there for them, with them, without judgment, and with unconditional positive regard.

Fifth and last, I communicated to Avatar that they hold the key to their own success. They would sometimes ask variations of the question, “What do you think...?” and as a facilitator—not an advisor—my response, often a question, would frustrate my client because they wanted a direction-based answer from me. Despite initial frustration, Avatar appreciated that I could not provide direction. Only Avatar had the answer, and they began trusting themselves, seeing they have the necessary tools to find that answer.

CBC. One way I used this approach—cognitive behavioral therapy/coaching—was to ask Avatar to question their assumptions. This approach helped to flip issues on their side and dissect where these assumptions came from. Our minds tend to rush to the worst-case scenario; this CBC technique gives rise to other less negative possibilities and often leads to more likely scenarios, ultimately giving us some peace of mind.

CBC helps us question our assumptions behind motivations and behaviors. When we are asked to question these things, we get that much closer to understanding our thought processes and overall humanity. We get closer to making the implicit explicit and uncovering what is consciously or unconsciously hidden under the veil.

Another CBC tactic I used was asking questions that encouraged Avatar to be calm and view things with a level head. For example, if Avatar was stressed or angry about something or someone, I empathized and

recognized the stress or anger (humanistic), but I might also follow up with the question, “What is this stress/anger doing for you/to you?” or “How is stressing/being angry helping to accomplish what you want to accomplish?” (CBC). CBC was also helpful with Avatar in creating concrete, measurable goals by asking questions that would require them to think about what they truly want (Wildflower, 2011). These questions were helpful in creating manageable goals to set themselves up for success.

Positive. Positive psychology was a common way for me to pull Avatar out of negative places when they were being entirely too critical of themselves. Kauffman (2006) shares that at the heart of coaching lies the coach’s ability to redirect the coachee’s attention from pain to their hopes, dreams, and strengths. The coach needs to find a balance in honoring the safe space for sharing pain and disappointment (humanistic) while also shifting the coachee’s framework to one of “strength and vision rather than weakness and pain” (Kauffman, 2006, p. 220).

For example, I might recount accomplishments or strengths that Avatar had shared with me previously, or something the interviewees they chose for the 360 feedback had said about Avatar. I might ask them to tell me about a time when they felt joyful or happy or strong or carefree. I might ask them to describe how their best friend would describe them. I might ask them to consider how far they have come (i.e., where were you this time last year?). I especially would try to end sessions on a high note, something positive and encouraging for Avatar to exit the session and reenter life.

Narrative. Narrative coaching is another technique that helped, specifically with Avatar, because they have such a creative and artistic mind. I tried to use it when Avatar made themselves the problem by asking Avatar to extract the problem from themselves. “What would it look like if...?” or “What smell or color comes to mind when...?” or “Think of a movie/show/book. What character comes to mind when...?” (And from there, Avatar was born.) “If you could externalize this feeling, what object would you name it?” It was also helpful with my coachee when I would ask them to imagine their story—what they want it to look like, what character they want to be, who else is allowed into this story, and when they want to partake in this story.

The feedback report process was such a rewarding experience. I created the feedback report to enhance my client’s understanding best: I included superhero and *Avatar the Last Airbender* references; I separated the responses by Professional World and Personal World; I created a section called Golden Shares, which included encouraging quotes from interviewees; and I created a What’s Next section, which outlined the remainder of our coaching engagement, offering next steps to consider based on the feedback, and encouraged Avatar to reflect on their initial goals in coaching to determine if the goals had changed at all.

The feedback report raises the value of the coaching experience by providing the client with valuable feedback from the individuals they hand-picked. As a coach, this experience with Avatar moved me from conscious

incompetence firmly into conscious competence, and at times even unconscious competence, causing my coaching confidence to skyrocket.

Questions and Answers

In becoming a coach, I have elevated questioning over answering. This reveals another consistency in my evolution of self—the rejection of absolutes, recognizing my inability to have answers I once thought as given, the inevitable movement away from certainty and the freedom to say *I don't know*. This approach, my natural movement, works well within the coaching realm because it is the default attitude of the coach: *I don't know, I don't have your answers*. I often find myself referring back to Stoltzfus's (2008) words on this:

Nobody knows more about you than you. Since all the memories of your life are stored in your head, you are the resident expert on you. So if you are, say, trying to improve your relationship with a co-worker, you can call up years of memories of working with that person... The coach has none of that information. The coachee always knows far more about the situation than the coach. (p. 9)

This is why questions hold far greater weight than any answer I could provide to my clients. Stober (2006) shares this understanding as well, stating that the coach needs to be the expert of the coaching process, while the client is the content expert. The underlying assumption in this whole process is the client's "innate capacity for growth" (Stober, 2006, p. 20).

Questions remove the coach as the centerpiece—this is about the client, not the coach. Answers make it about me, the coach. Answers would diminish the client's experience. Answers are the explicit representation of the implicit *I know better than you*. My answers are saturated in my own experiences, filtered through my own framework, and exhaled through my own lenses. My experience

and me sharing it might hold value for others, but the coaching environment is not the place for such sharing. As Rogers (2016) wisely and succinctly puts it, “coaching is about the client’s issues, not the coach’s” (p. 56). Sharing such answers in this environment also risks a violation of Haan’s (2007) first commandment: *do no harm*. Perhaps sharing an answer would not do harm, but if I am honest with myself as a coach, it would risk doing harm. And that is not a risk worth taking simply to satisfy my ego, which thinks it knows a better way.

The aha moments I experienced in the OD program—perspective and perception, self-confrontation, understanding organizations differently, and finding a passion in coaching—have been momentous in this process of the evolving of self. In certain contexts, this process might seem passive and unintentional, but Merriam-Webster’s Dictionary defines evolution as “a process of continuous change from a lower, simpler, or worse to a higher, more complex, or better state” (Evolution, 2c.1). By definition and as shown in this chapter, the evolution of self can be an ongoing state of intentional choices, actions, and behaviors. Is it always linear and progressive? No. That is where growth mindset and the ability to learn and grow from setbacks have been helpful for me.

These aha moments were not simply realizations without action. The realizations produced life-altering ideas that I am still learning how to translate into productive action. So far, the actions taken as a result of these insights have impacted both my personal and my professional world.

CHAPTER 4

REAL-WORLD APPLICATION

“People often attempt to circumvent the effects of structural conflict with great hope and optimism, which is usually followed by great disillusionment. It is inherent in this structure that any actions you take to solve structural conflict only reinforce the experience of limitation and hence the structure itself. Since the nature of this conflict is structural, it is only by changing the underlying structure of your life that you can make any real and lasting change.”

—Fritz (1989, pp. 87-88)

Having detailed my aha moments throughout my time in the OD program in the previous chapter, I want to share what those moments mean in the context of my personal and professional life in this chapter. Most importantly, the OD program provided a way for me to change the underlying structure of my life. Before entering the program, I felt emotionally stunted, spiritually drained, and unable to orient myself out of the oscillating structure that kept me bound and, in many ways, paralyzed in my work. My methods for changing things I wanted to change existed within a closed system because my understanding was within a closed system. I approached things from within the reactive-responsive orientation. Fritz (1989) notes that problem-solving does little more than buy us more time and added that “no matter what your problems are, for the most part, solving them won’t solve them. You will always have a new problem if you do not know how to create what you want” (p. 45).

The main focus here is the structure itself. Once I was able and willing to use the tools provided to me by the OD program, I freed my mindset, thereby entering a new structure, one that is more conducive to my growth and changing

self. This all sounds nice in theory, but how did these changes translate into real life?

Perception Is Reality, Perspective Is Everything

My internalization of this concept—perception is reality, perspective is everything—has changed how I view and experience reality itself, ultimately catalyzing my evolution of self. It has shifted my thinking patterns, how I understand myself in relation to what is around me, how I understand others, what I believe, and how I approach problems and solutions.

Influence on My Life

In my personal life, this aha moment is most pronounced in my spiritual well-being. A relentless search for Truth, previously constrained by religious tenets and doctrinal assertions, was truly unleashed by this aha moment. The difficulty in conveying my current spiritual reality lies in that it is a non-defined, ever-expanding, open-endedness.

I do not feel what used to be a once desperate need to have certainty. I now feel free to simply be and experience. To live. To enjoy and suffer and laugh and cry. To empathize. To accept myself and others. My former religion, which constituted my entire belief system—the lens through which I saw the world—promised spiritual finality for all. The irony is that despite the absolutism, I have found spiritual renewal as a result of deconstructing the pillars of my former faith.

I do not mean to feign a sense of “I have arrived”—I have not arrived at an endpoint nor do I wish to. However, I do feel a sense of completeness, not as an endpoint but simply in accepting things as they are and in accepting myself as I

am here and now. For reference, Brown's (2020) definition of spirituality is the one I have adopted:

Spirituality is recognizing and celebrating that we are all inextricably connected to each other by a power greater than all of us, and that our connection to that power and to one another is grounded in love and compassion. Practicing spirituality brings a sense of perspective, meaning, and purpose to our lives. (p. 64)

Self-acceptance has done wonders for my acceptance of others. This does not mean I agree with everyone—far from it. I feel I can accept others so well because I can empathize with their version of reality, their perspectives and perceptions, their way of living, and their search for meaning and truth. Past versions of my former self made me a gatekeeper for what constitutes truth and untruth, but now I do not have that heavy burden; now agreement and disagreement can be just that, whereas before disagreement literally damned anything *other* to hell. Because of this aha moment, I operate under the premise that *everyone is doing their best*—I cannot assert this is always or ever true but having this mentality allows me to have compassion and acceptance for those I might not otherwise have. Having an expanded understanding of perception and perspective has helped me to empathize with *other*; it has helped me recognize and acknowledge others' humanity, even when I think they are doing their best to ignore their own humanity.

Influence on My Work

A broader conceptual understanding of perception and perspective has changed how I speak to and about myself. Though self-talk impacts all aspects of my life, at this stage the impact has been most notable in my work environment. I

have implemented positive self-talk before important meetings and presentations. In practice, this looks like mindfulness meditation. I close my eyes, I focus on my breathing. I straighten my back, puff out my chest, and begin to internalize the confidence I am conveying. I tell myself I am prepared, I am worthy, I am enough. I focus on the steps I will take to arrive at the desired outcome, envisioning specifically what will constitute a successful result. I open my eyes as a more knowing, confident version of myself.

One example I can point to is the last job interview I had, which led to my current position. Leading into this interview I believed about myself that I am a terrible interviewer. And I spoke to myself accordingly. Adding to this, a key person in the job hiring process had already expressed to me that I was not qualified for the job. However, at that point I had just taken Arena and Benjamin's (2019) class, infusing in me a new confidence and introducing me to positive self-talk literature. I prepared thoroughly for the interview and practiced positive self-talk for days leading up to the interview, right up to the minute before I walked in. I credit landing that position to the tools provided to me by the OD program.

Another example I can point to is overcoming my paralyzing, sickness-inducing fear of speaking in front of people. Now I regularly lead extensive trainings for large groups of people. While getting in front of people is still not a favorite activity, I have made long strides in a positive direction.

Confronting Myself

Perhaps the most difficult aha moment to integrate regularly is honestly confronting myself. Essentially, confronting myself is the act of bringing the

unconscious into consciousness. In the past I completely avoided doing this; I was content in letting the cognitive dissonance consume me, consciously unwilling and unable to confront myself—until the OD program, that is.

Influence on My Life

A very tangible way in which this aha moment has impacted me is that it has allowed me to connect with myself in a meaningful and constructive way. It has helped me understand what I need and not suppress those needs. I also realized I need boundaries, which were essentially nonexistent before. Setting these boundaries has resulted in releasing one-sided friendships that left me feeling depleted and empty. I found myself going to significant lengths to maintain a number of friendships, but it all paled in how I made myself emotionally available for others, even after they consistently did not show up for me when it mattered most.

Setting boundaries has meant taking care of myself financially and saying no when I used to say yes even when saying yes would mean falling further into debt. Setting boundaries has meant putting myself first sometimes, valuing my needs, and recognizing that this act of self-love is not selfish.

Influence on My Work

In addition to the benefits listed above, the OD program challenged me to uncover my unconscious biases, which has allowed me to be more observant of my reactions and the behaviors of others in my work environment. It has given me eyes to spot patterns that form seemingly undetected within my work environment. For example, when being seated in a meeting, is there a reason the

men sit on one side of the table and women on the other? Is there a reason generally more attractive people eat lunch together? Is there a reason the elderly white man in the room is given unquestioned deference and assumed to be the leader when he walks in?

Being aware of my own unconscious biases has been helpful for me to challenge my formerly unquestioned reactions, while also being more observant of the forming patterns that have resulted from unconscious bias on a macro level across the organization. I find myself overcorrecting at times to prevent bias from determining my actions or inactions. For example, now that I am aware of my unconscious bias to assign social power to someone from the white majority, I have made a concerted effort to unlearn this auto-assignment and remove assumptions based on ethnicity and social class.

Understanding Organizations in a Different Light

The OD program gave me invaluable insight into organizations, which has surely impacted me beyond my professional environment but, due to the nature of this insight, the impact is especially visible in my work environment.

Influence on My Work

In the previous chapter I went into detail about my preferred lenses and my intention to view the organization from all levels: individual, interpersonal, group, and organizational. I have learned the importance of looking for patterns when observing and evaluating organizations, just as I do when looking for unconscious bias patterns—hiring patterns, disciplinary patterns, promotion patterns, and patterns within organizational culture. I have also learned the

importance of absorbing data and recognizing that everything is data—not only what I choose to focus on but also what I initially choose to ignore.

When observing organizations—whether I am in a consultant’s role or as an employee—I see value in maintaining a stranger’s perspective. As my professor shared, “there is power in staying a stranger to the system, familiarity brings about blindness” (Subramanian, 2020). I always try to ask myself, regardless of my role: *What does this place make me feel?* The answer to that question alone can provide the necessary information we need as employees and consultants to determine our next course of action (Subramanian, 2020).

It is important for me to maintain a stranger’s view because the longer we remain in a dysfunctional place, the more we become blind, though not immune to its dysfunction. Maintaining this view also helps me remove the arrogance of knowing it all, which helps me form more meaningful and mutually respectful relationships.

A specific example of how viewing organizations in a different light has impacted me is how I view the individual and, in turn, how I interact with the individual. Unfortunately, I am all too familiar with the mechanistic tendency of organizations to dehumanize the individual person by making the individual nothing more than a replaceable, unimportant object (Morgan, 2006). The organization has business needs that the individual must meet, but the organization often fails to reciprocate and meet the individual’s needs. This failure becomes evident when companies are not giving adequate time off to new parents, let alone to single parents; when paying employees poverty level wages;

and when creating policy to protect the organization but not the individual (i.e., inclusive policies on paper but dismissive of harassment allegations).

As a result of my learnings in the OD program, I believe part of my informal role in any organization is to counter this organizational tendency to dehumanize individuals. I counter this by mentally removing titles as a precursor for showing respect. I counter it by regularly having genuine conversations with employees who are on the socially construed lower rungs of the organizational hierarchy so that my behavior can help rehumanize and provide space for individual stories. It is a small part, this informal role, but I believe it can have a significant organizational impact if more individuals counter the organizational tendency to view the individual as nothing more than a cog in the machine.

Experiencing Coaching, Finding a Passion

From my time in the OD program, my OCEC cohort (Pennington et al., 2019) experience provided the most personal value to me. The skills and knowledge I gained directly from the cohort led to this last aha moment, finding a passion in coaching. It has been practically useful in a professional environment as well as in my personal life. The coaching process allows me, the coach, to form a relationship that genuinely sees, prioritizes, and respects the client and desires nothing but success for the client regardless of the direction it takes the client or the coaching relationship. Professionally, it has given me agency to connect on a deeper level with people at work and informally facilitate coworkers' development. Personally, it has given me the opportunity to be a more insightful and present friend.

Influence on My Life

Understanding how and when to use coaching theories have been useful in every facet of my life. The theories that have had the most impact on me outside of a formal coaching or professional environment are humanistic psychology, positive psychology, CBC, and narrative coaching. The details of how I have used these theories in a formal setting can be found in Chapter 3.

Humanistic psychology has encouraged me to connect with people in a more compassionate, empathetic, and authentic way. It gives permission to be imperfect and to relate to the other person in a nonjudgmental way by introducing and maintaining unconditional positive regard. The emphasis that humanistic psychology places on a person-centered, holistic approach (Whybrow & Wildflower, 2011) has provided evidence to the benefits of empathy. Throughout the program I came to realize how bad of a listener I was—a lot of times I prepared an answer before the other person even finished talking. Now I am intentional about how I listen. I listen to understand, not necessarily to respond.

Humanistic psychology holds an optimistic outlook on the person (Stober & Grant, 2006) so it is no surprise that my tendency is to also use positive psychology; both approaches feel quite complementary to each other. Whereas humanistic psychology has helped me to see the best in people, positive psychology has helped me to help others see the best in themselves. It has been a tool for encouragement to get people to focus on their strengths, positive attributes, and hopes and dreams (Hefferon, 2011). It is a tool I regularly use in conversations with friends when trying to redirect their negative thinking patterns.

While I invite and honor the space to be honest about concerns and what the other person is struggling with (humanistic), I try to shift the focus to a hopeful tone by reiterating positive happenings they have shared with me or their positive attributes (positive).

Influence on My Work

As a result of the OCEC cohort, I am more intentional about check-ins with coworkers. It is very informal, and it is always either in their office space or in a neutral space. The reason it is not in my workspace is because I do not want them to associate my formal role with our informal check-in, in which I want the focus to be on them. The idea here is that creating a space unrelated to my formal title can help form an equal playing field, something that is needed in the coaching relationship (Rogers, 2016; Cox, 2006). This equal partnership “in a learning relationship” is one of many overlapping factors between adult learning and coaching (Cox, 2006, p. 195).

This act of informal coaching is another way I counter the organization’s mechanistic tendencies. After all, coaching assumes that each person is “complex and multifaceted” (Peterson, 2006, p. 51), and it is very difficult to simplify the human experience—as mechanistic environments do—with a coaching viewpoint.

Some useful questions have been: “What’s going well? What’s not going well? What could be better? What can you do now to make it better? What do you want to do? Is there a reason you haven’t done that/asked that? What do you expect from that interaction? What are you hoping to accomplish in that?” My

hope in this line of questioning is to facilitate my colleagues' development by bringing attention to what their goals and dreams are, connecting thought to action.

Changing Perspectives Over Time

The fact that my perspective has changed so dramatically over the time spent in the OD program points to how significant a role the program played in my evolution of self. From the coursework to my discussions with faculty and classmates and to the reflective process encouraged in each course, each aspect of the program encouraged the growth mindset that I came in with from the beginning. I came in expecting and hoping to be challenged. The words of my undergrad professor—*you will get out of it what you put in* (Zigarelli, 2015)—reverberating in my mind.

Growth requires deep reflection. Not engaging in the reflection process would most certainly result in missed opportunities to learn and to grow. Daudelin (1996) echoes this sentiment, affirming that asking questions is one of the most important parts of the reflection process, which, in turn, is a vital part to growth.

By adopting a growth mindset, I did the most important thing I could do—I took action. I made concrete plans and acted on them. Gollwitzer's research shows that simply vowing to do something is useless (Dweck, 2016). People often say they will do something tomorrow—and *tomorrow* never comes. As Dweck puts it, "the next day comes and the next day goes" (p. 238). A fixed mindset and the accompanying paralysis of "what if I fail" and "what if I'm not _____ enough" ruled my inaction for years.

A growth mindset led to me viewing all of my past work experiences as growth opportunities, even if others might consider them utter failures. Dweck (2016) points out that within a fixed mindset “failure has been transformed from an action (I failed) to an identity (I am a failure)” (p. 33). This important distinction has been a key takeaway of having a growth mindset, and it has helped me to begin extracting this act of failing from my identity. Dweck notes that having the view that change and growth are possible does not save us from feeling the pain of failure, but it does mean that failures won’t define us.

Spreading through my consciousness, the implementation of growth mindset, which is unquestionably harmonious with my aha moments, has moved me further along the continuum of self-discovery, expanding my understanding of reality—or the perception of reality—and encouraging the belief that my evolution of self is a constant and necessary process.

Having discussed the application of my aha moments as well as the transformative process my identity underwent, the next chapter concludes this personal journey narrative. However, only the chronicling of this phase is what has concluded; my journey of growth and learning is only just beginning.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION: THIS IS NOT THE END

"Happiness must happen, and the same holds for success: you have to let it happen by not caring about it. I want you to listen to what your conscience commands you to do and go on to carry it out to the best of your knowledge. Then you will live to see that in the long run—in the long run, I say! —success will follow you precisely because you had forgotten to think of it."
—Frankl (1992, pp. 12-13)

Though this chapter concludes my work in the OD program, there is nothing final about growth. Change is a constant, whether it is welcome or not, but we can choose how to respond to this change—at least that is what Frankl (1992) imparts in his account of surviving through Nazi concentration camps. Embracing the process of the evolving self is a state of mind, an intentional and constant engagement with the otherwise unspoken elements that I would sometimes rather ignore. Incorporating learning into every scenario is the work of the growth mindset-minded individual, rejecting the notion that qualities are static and set in stone (Dweck, 2016).

Growth mindset provides the individual with a different framework through which to navigate things and create necessary or desired change (Dweck, 2016). Fritz (1989) noted that this level of change, lasting change, is accomplished by altering the underlying structure of our lives. I posit that changing the underlying structure has resulted in a complete overhaul of how I view myself, a factor that Dweck's (2016) research shows profoundly affects how we live our lives.

How I view myself—my strengths and weaknesses, capabilities and limitations, life experiences, and *failures*—has changed dramatically during my

time in the OD program. I attribute this changed to my aha moments, intensive self-reflection, conversations with faculty and classmates, and the content of course curricula. The OD program laid the groundwork for these moments, but the underlying structure of growth mindset was pivotal in my embrace of these moments and in seeing them as opportunities for growth and learning.

The motivation of personal—not professional—growth and development was the whole reason for joining the OD program. I believe that having this motivation and maintaining a growth mindset is allowing me to become successful in the professional sphere, without that being my express goal. As Frankl noted in the opening quote to this chapter, success will follow because I'm not necessarily thinking about it. This is not to say that it just happens; Frankl stresses in the previous sentence that one should listen to one's conscience and act on their knowledge accordingly. I have done this through the OD program and intend to carry it on beyond the program.

I explore two more areas for future growth in this chapter. First, what unanswered questions do I still have? And second, how will I extend and further develop my learnings from this program over time?

Unanswered Questions

I am leaving the OD program with fewer of the original questions that I came in with. The key word here being *original*. I am confident in the knowledge imparted through the program. It answered many questions about organizational diversity, inclusion, and belonging (Floyd & Legatt, 2019), what it looks like to create adaptive space and allow for emergence (Arena & Benjamin, 2019), what

the coaching process involves and how to navigate a consulting relationship (Pennington et al., 2019), how to develop and execute an effective social media campaign (Havely & Warren, 2021), and why organizations need to adapt to nontraditional and forward-thinking methods (Mulgrew & McAdam, 2021).

For as many of the *original* questions as the program answered for me, it created its own questions for two reasons. First, many of these questions are attributable to my questioning of traditional frameworks and my rejection of absolutes, which have essentially brought all factors that made up my former frameworks into question. Second, I now see far more value in asking questions—reflecting on them and leaving them open-ended—than in having answers.

Going through the OD program has made me more aware of the many layers, facets, and endless combination of factors that make individuals and organizations complex. I have further established myself in the Socratic Paradox (I know that I know nothing)—the glaring feeling of how little I actually know, the surfaces of knowledge that I have just barely begun to scratch. I use the iceberg analogy: what is seen and known is but a small part of the greater whole, most of which is hidden under the surface.

My lingering, unanswered questions address learning, changing, identity, myths and reality, control or lack thereof, and my time after the OD program. I have addressed the topics of learning, changing, and identity in the preceding chapters of this capstone, but the questions I still have are only partially answered, at best. They are important for me to reflect on, but I do not feel any

urgency to answer these questions because I am somewhat convinced of the nature of their open-ended, relative, situational answers. I also feel no urgency to answer because, as Sagan (1997) reminds us, we hope to keep narrowing down possibilities as new evidence presents itself, but “no knowledge is complete or perfect” (p. 30). The answers, let alone the questions themselves, differ from person to person.

Will I Ever Hit an Endpoint in Learning and Growing?

It feels very close-minded to think I will ever get to an endpoint in growing. The irony is that former versions of myself believed I had reached that very level of knowledge, specifically in spiritual terms. I had the arrogance to assert my beliefs and answers as universal. Most of the answers I held were exclusionary, short-sighted, and dismissive of others’ experiences and perspectives.

The question of this section is central to Dweck’s (2016) research. According to Dweck, a fixed mindset believes there is an endpoint or boundary, while a growth mindset does not think of growth and learning as having an end. I am not sure about the answer to this question, but I do see how my answer or lack of answer is influenced by having a growth mindset. So, is it about mindset? If one has a fixed mindset, maybe learning and growing has an ending. If one has a growth mindset, maybe learning and growing is continuous.

Maslow’s hierarchy of needs—from physiological to safety to love and belonging to esteem and finally self-actualization and transcendence—suggests that one only grows from one level to the next as one’s needs are met. However, after decades of research Maslow noted that individual differences,

circumstances, and experiences play a large part in determining each person's needs (McLeod, 2018). Furthermore, Maslow noted that growth and self-actualization are personal metrics, and in terms of reaching some sort of endpoint, "self-actualization is a continual process of becoming rather than a perfect state one reaches" (McLeod, 2018, p. 9).

What Makes Us Who We Are?

I have addressed identity and the evolution of self throughout this capstone, but as far as what forms our identity and makes us who we are, is there a consensus? A few related questions come to mind when thinking about what actually makes me who I am. Is it a combination of nature and nurture? Or one over the other? Am I mind and/or body and/or soul? Am I simply an assortment of physical atoms that make up the parts of my physical body? Am I a transcendental soul with a physical representation? Am I the collection of subjective experiences? Am I a compilation of collective experience? Because I think, therefore, am I? But what am I? Do I decide? Or is it somewhat decided for me? Is what makes me who I am today different than what makes me who I *am* yesterday or who I *am* tomorrow? Or is it who I *was* yesterday? Or who I *will be* tomorrow?

To What Extent Do We Control Things?

This question leads me to the myth or reality of free will. I can at least control how I react to external circumstances, right? I might not have control over a situation, but I should have control over how I respond, right? But to what extent have external circumstances—traumas and hardships—influenced my

internal processing—emotional and cognitive capabilities. Do external circumstances ever corrupt internal processes to an irreversible extent? What role does mindset play in all of this? What role does resilience play in all of this? What role does motivation play in all of this?

Do We Need the Myths We Create?

Myths are all around; they have literally constructed societies and civilization itself for as long as we have a written history (Harari, 2018). Without myths, the credit cards in my pocket would be meaningless. Kings and queens would not exist, and government itself would be obsolete. White Europeans would not have assumed supremacy to conquer and colonize the rest of the world. Slavery in all of its ugly forms throughout history would not exist. White Europeans would not have stripped native peoples throughout the world of their culture and traditions for the sake of a supremacist gospel. We would not have ideas about our origins as a species—hence the abundance of creation myths.

I have come to discover that myths are not inherently good or bad; they are ever present, impacting every part of our collective and individual experience. As I mentioned in Chapter 3, recognizing the role played by myths and social constructs has been an important process for me. It has made me think that in many ways I need both the myths that I create and those that I inherit. If nothing else, myths give me context to relate, connect, compare, analyze, and perceive. Is *reality* ever devoid of myth? Would a reality devoid of myths be reality? Even becoming aware of and sifting through myths to create my own reality is a myth in itself, is it not? Or is it the most real reality? Is reality dependent on myths?

Either way it is up to the collective for grand scale myths and up to the individual for personal myths.

Extending Beyond the Organizational Dynamics Program

My time in the OD program has been formative so I intend to extend my take-aways, aha moments, and learnings well past the program. As I shared in Chapter 4, my learnings presently impact me personally and professionally. How will I extend and further develop my learnings over time? There are a few ways I plan on doing this.

First, I will continue to purposefully integrate these learnings into my personal and professional environments. I say *purposeful* because I want to be intentional in my actions and put theory and new knowledge to action. I sometimes find myself going through the motions and being unconscious of what I am doing and how I am doing it—this is what I want to become more aware of and continue to uncover by bringing the unconscious level into consciousness.

Second, I plan on staying connected with the OD community at the University of Pennsylvania. This supportive community has provided me with meaningful connection, positive affirmation, and genuine belonging. I was not expecting that a community filled with such intellectually brilliant minds would also make efforts to ease my imposter syndrome, but it was more common than not that I found solidarity with others who felt the same way.

Third, I plan on continuing my learning and education in this realm. Though I plan to do so informally, I am not closing myself off to the possibility of furthering my formal education in this space. Because the knowledge is so

practical, I believe that furthering my understanding of organizational dynamics can further improve my professional experience regardless of the role or industry in which I find myself. Additionally, I will continue to immerse myself in evidence-based coaching theory and literature because of the value I have received as a client and the positive impact I believe coaching can have on others.

We sometimes think of learning or growth “as vertical processes” (Engeström, 2018, p. 62), but in my experience learning has been in every which direction. It has been vertical, horizontal, circular, and a jumbled-up mess in every direction, sometimes all at once. No matter the linearity or lack thereof, I tend to rotate my conceptualization of the situation or trajectory to make meaning of the learning opportunity. If it is horizontal, maybe I can rotate the framework itself to perceive it as vertical; if it is circular, maybe I attempt to flatten the line in whatever direction it decides to land; if it is a jumble of squiggly lines, maybe I can find the beauty in the ambiguous and uncertain nature of that experience.

This is a conclusion, yes, but I can confidently say this is only the beginning of my organizational dynamics journey. I have a solid foundation, but I have a long way to go. And I might always have a long way to go. As Rogers (2016) noted about coaching, “there will never be a point for me, nor I predict for you, where it is possible to stand back and say ‘Well, I made it—I’m now the complete and perfect coach’” (p. 4). This is not a discouragement, or even a challenge. I am just grateful to be on the journey.

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